

CHESTERTON  
AND THE ROMANCE  
OF ORTHODOXY

THE MAKING OF GKC  
1874–1908

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# Introduction

When Chesterton published *Orthodoxy* in 1908 he was 34 years old; and though he was by now one of the most successful writers of the age, many readers still did not know quite what to make of him. Even his religious views were not entirely clear at the time, strange though this may seem now. Despite his dogged two-year campaign, in three different newspapers, in defence of Christianity—which had begun five years before in response to the vociferously secularist assaults of the socialist writer Robert Blatchford—he was still seen as almost wilfully unpredictable, given to plunging into any topic that might occur to him on the spur of the moment, rather than as a writer with any consistency of purpose. His defence of Christianity had been conducted in three very different newspapers, each with its own specialised readership. His regular audience in *The Daily News*, his principal journalistic outlet, were acquainted by now with his views on the Christian religion (though his weekly column was by no means obsessively concerned with them); but the paper's readers tended to be not only Liberal in politics but Nonconformist in religion. *The Commonwealth* was the organ of the Christian Social Union, leftward leaning in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion, edited by one of the great post-Tractarian theologians of the day, Henry Scott Holland. The controversy had been wound up with a series of articles by Chesterton in Blatchford's own paper, the socialist (and mostly atheist) weekly *The Clarion*. Those who read these papers were probably in no doubt as to Chesterton's views on religion. But those who did not (possibly a majority of those who had followed his literary career) were not necessarily acquainted with them, despite *Heretics* (1905), which one might have thought would have put the matter beyond doubt: three years later, nevertheless, *Orthodoxy's* reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian* commented that 'not a few of his habitual readers, hearing that he has written a book about orthodoxy in religion, will be quite uncertain whether to look for a defence or an attack'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B.S., 'Mr Chesterton on Orthodoxy', *Manchester Guardian* (29 Sept. 1908); Conlon, 167.

*Orthodoxy* was the book in which Chesterton first fully declared himself unmistakably. The very title, as he recalled in his autobiography, ‘was provocative. . . . A serious defence of orthodoxy was far more startling to the English critic than a serious attack on orthodoxy was to the Russian censor. . . . Very nearly everybody, in the ordinary literary and journalistic world, began by taking it for granted that my faith in the Christian creed was a pose or a paradox. . . . It was not until long afterwards that the full horror of the truth burst upon them; the disgraceful truth that I really thought the thing was true. . . . Since then they have been more combative; and I do not blame them.’<sup>2</sup> The publication of *Orthodoxy* was the end of a journey. It was both the conclusion of a process of self-discovery and the key document (for there were others) in which, at this pivotal moment in his life, he assessed not only where it was that he now stood but how it was that his journey had followed the course that it did: *Orthodoxy*, he declared in the book’s first chapter, ‘is a kind of slovenly autobiography’.<sup>3</sup>

In the same year, 1908, he published *The Man who was Thursday*, a work in some vital ways even more self-revealing. It contains a lengthy and at times powerfully emotional dedication, in verse, to his closest friend, Edmund Clerihew Bentley. This dedication is centrally important to any history of Chesterton’s mind (though most of his biographers ignore it), and it will be necessary to consider it in detail in a later chapter. It is enough, here, to note how it establishes 1908 as a year in which it seemed natural to this prolific—and by now almost extravagantly successful—young writer to pause and gratefully to take stock of his life; there is a sense here of profound relief, of coming into port after traversing perilous seas, of the danger of a personal shipwreck narrowly avoided:

This is a tale of those old fears, even of those emptied hells,  
And none but you shall understand the true thing that it tells. . . .  
The doubts that were so plain to chase, so dreadful to withstand—  
Oh, who shall understand but you; yea, who shall understand. . . .  
Between us, by the peace of God, such truth can now be told;  
Yea, there is strength in striking root and good in growing old.<sup>4</sup>

Chesterton was not alone in seeing 1908 as a pivotal point in his career. Between *The Man who was Thursday* and *Orthodoxy*, his brother Cecil published an anonymous (and, though loyal, by no means entirely

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography*, 180.

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Works*, i. 215.

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Man who was Thursday* (London: Penguin, 1986), 6–7.

uncritical) assessment of his brother's achievement thus far. Cecil's book *G. K. Chesterton: A Criticism* conveys accurately enough the extent of his brother's fame, though, as we shall see, he greatly exaggerates the dizziness of its steady rather than meteoric rise:

In the autumn of the year 1899 no one outside his own circle had ever heard of G. K. Chesterton. In the spring of 1900 everyone was asking everyone else, 'Who is "G.K.C."?' Before the year was over his own name and writings were better known than those of men who had made reputations while he was still an infant. I do not know any [other] example in the last fifty years of so dizzy a rise from obscurity to fame.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, he had published very little by the spring of 1900, and even by the end of the year, though he had produced two books of verse and a respectable number of articles, it cannot yet be said that 'everyone was asking everyone else, Who is "G.K.C."?' Even when his 'rise from obscurity to fame' had taken place, it still took some time (as we have seen) for his contemporaries to make out exactly what it was they had on their hands. Partly this was because of the confusing variety of the published works now appearing in rapid succession: comic verse with accompanying drawings (*Greybeards at Play*, 1900); poetry and doom-laden drama (*The Wild Knight*, 1900); campaigning journalism (*The Speaker*, *The Daily News*, and other outlets, 1899 onwards); the fine arts (*G. F. Watts*, 1903); literary criticism (*Robert Browning*, 1904; *Charles Dickens*, 1906); novels and short stories (*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 1904; *The Club of Queer Trades*, 1905), religious controversy (*The Daily News*, *The Commonwealth*, and *The Clarion* newspaper, 1903–4; *Heretics*, 1905). But the real reason why this abundant literary phenomenon was so difficult to make out was that all this chaotic output showed nothing more clearly than that Chesterton himself was still, in full view, undergoing a process of intellectual development and self-discovery. In the early years of the decade, indeed, he was becoming well known not only before he had become detectably 'orthodox', but at a time when he seemed still (on the evidence of his earliest published work) intellectually closer to Stopford Brooke, the celebrity modernist preacher—at whose feet he had sat in the Bedford chapel a decade before<sup>6</sup>—than to the 'doctrinaire' Roman Catholic Hilaire Belloc (whom he had met in the autumn of 1899) or to Conrad Noel, the left-wing Anglo-Catholic he had also met shortly before his emergence from obscurity. His first appearance, at the age of 26,

<sup>5</sup> Cecil, 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Autobiography*, 174. See pp. 68–72 below.

was in the persona of the anti-clerical anti-dogmatist he had been ten years before as a prolific teenage poet and essayist. ‘In a less tolerant age’, wrote the literary critic James Douglas in his review of *The Wild Knight*, which appeared in November 1900, “‘Gilbert Chesterton’ might find himself arraigned as a blaspheming atheist. . . . Some of the most powerful lyrics in this volume I can hardly venture to quote, so terrible is their pessimism, so insurgently brutal their insurrection against orthodox idols and ideals.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Wild Knight*, however, is in some ways a regression to earlier periods in Chesterton’s life. It is an incongruous ragbag of work he had been collecting over the previous five years: it recalls the raw anti-clericalism of his schoolboy verse, and the intermittent but traumatic pessimism of his time of crisis as a student at the Slade School of Art; it also contains poems which reflect the recovery of his underlying optimism, though these do not predominate. Interestingly, Rudyard Kipling, on reading this strange but powerful collection, suggested that Gilbert needed ‘a severe course of Walt Whitman’ so that he might be ‘jolted out of’ his tendency to depressive imagery.<sup>8</sup> But Whitman (together with Robert Louis Stevenson) was part of a literary cure he had already taken, and *The Wild Knight* also reflects Whitman’s influence. What the collection demonstrates most vividly is that although the auspices under which his discovery of orthodoxy could now take place were assembled (his devout fiancée Frances, Belloc, Conrad Noel and other Anglican clergy), the serious intellectual business which had to be done before that discovery could be authentically his own was still in its early stages.

The starting point for this journey of discovery, however, has to be traced further back than the turn of the century, further back than his student days at University College, London, and the Slade School of Art, further back, even, than his precocious adolescence during the early 1890s. There are few other major writers whose literary and even political influences can be traced back to their early childhood, few whose childhood, indeed, remained with them throughout life in quite the same way, not—as with James Barrie, or A. A. Milne, perhaps—as something he never grew out of, but as a persistent source of literary vitality which in no way raises questions about lack of maturity or refusal to grow up. His childhood was not without its sorrows; it would not, nevertheless, be wrong to describe it as a cloudlessly happy one. And Chesterton’s parents, in an impressively relaxed but

<sup>7</sup> Conlon, 30–1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

persistent way, took their children's intellectual growth seriously from their earliest years. They shared with them their values, they fed their growing minds by endlessly talking to them and reading to them, and by nurturing their capacity to learn for themselves, in short, by encouraging and making possible the attainment of that priceless Victorian ideal, the 'well-stocked mind'.

Thus, the whole of Chesterton's life so far has to be seen as the period over which we need to trace the process of intellectual discovery which comes to a fairly clear *terminus ad quem* in 1908 with *Orthodoxy*. To chart this journey of discovery involves a whole series of questions. How, born into what Carlyle had called, so many years before, an age of 'down-pulling and disbelief', did this child of Victorian modernist liberalism become, in the way that he did, such an icon of anti-modernist cultural counter-revolution? And what, having become an anti-modernist, was the logic which made it increasingly inevitable that he would embrace orthodox Christianity? This last question may seem a strange one: the general assumption has always been that Chesterton's reaction against the idea of progress was a consequence of his Christianity. But Chesterton's anti-modernism emerged independently at the same time as (and possibly even before) his Christianity. Partly, its origins were political, and had to do with his support for the pro-Boer cause in particular and for the independence of small nations in general: the anti-Boer party within South Africa described itself as 'progressive' in contrast to the Boers, who were defending their long-established traditions against the irruption of the modern world. Quite simply, the imperialists saw themselves as representing the forces of modernity and change: it is strange but true that at this curious juncture in English history, to be anti-imperialist was to be considered reactionary; the leading intellectual exponents of socialism, Shaw and most of the Fabian Society, supported the war, as did a large part of the Liberal party. In the same year as he concluded his defence of Christianity in *The Clarion*, Chesterton published *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), in which he imagines an explanation given to the former President of a small country, which has been forcibly absorbed by a larger one, of why his country's continued independence had been inconsistent with modern thought:

You misunderstand, I think, the modern intellect. . . . If I differ with the greatest of respect from your Nicaraguan enthusiasm, it is not because a nation or ten nations



were against you; it is because civilisation was against you. We moderns believe in a great cosmopolitan civilisation, one which shall include all the talents of all the absorbed peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Chesterton's distaste for modernity and progress, however, was a recent volte-face, one which had its consequences, not all of them predictable: one result was that he felt inclined to defend anything that modernity was against. This included the Christian religion, though, as we shall see, he had other reasons for his increasingly pro-Christian views. The point is that these views (like his rejection of the cult of progress) were of recent date. Thus when, in 1903, Robert Blatchford published, in *The Clarion* newspaper, a series of attacks on the Christian religion, and Chesterton set himself to rebut them in a series of articles in various papers which came to an end only the following year, his defence, though spirited enough, was of something of which his understanding was still rapidly developing. Nevertheless, this was the first time that he had in a sustained way publicly avowed his belief in the Christian religion. He was beginning to approach the end of a long process of intellectual transition: Cecil called it his 'drift towards orthodoxy'.<sup>10</sup> The following year, he published *Heretics* (1905), a collection of attacks on literary figures of the day (Shaw, Wells, Kipling, George Moore, and others) in which, once more, there was no coherent defence of Christianity as such, but a wealth of evidence that he understood what it was. 'By showing what heresy implies', writes David Dooley, 'Chesterton illustrates what orthodoxy implies.'<sup>11</sup> Perhaps; but as we shall see (Chapter 7), discussions of the implications of orthodoxy in *Heretics* are more than once occasions for Chesterton to make it clear that he has come to the view that orthodox belief is identical with the teachings of the Christian tradition. By the time, three years later, that Chesterton published *Orthodoxy* itself, we have the sense of an arrival, of the attainment of an equilibrium newly won but now permanent: now, his Christianity is defined clearly as being a systematic body of belief held by a historical community of faith:

'When the word 'orthodoxy' is used here it means the Apostle's Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself Christian until a very short time ago and the general historic conduct of those who held such a creed.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London, 1904), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Cecil, 95–123.

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Works*, i. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 215.

It is, more or less, the classic formulation of St Vincent de Lérins (dearly loved by Anglo-Catholics): ‘that which was believed everywhere, always, and by all’ (‘ubique, semper et ab omnibus’). He had come a long way since his beliefs on such matters had been formed, nearly two decades before, by the Reverend Stopford Brooke, who taught him that ‘Creeds . . . have been used in all ages as the weapons of spiritual tyranny’ (a proposition the young Gilbert had passionately espoused).<sup>13</sup> His thinking was certainly not static from this point on; but we have the sense that all his writings on the Christian religion after 1908 were built on foundations now firmly established. When he died twenty-eight years later, T. S. Eliot pronounced that ‘Chesterton’s social and economic ideas were *the* ideas for his time that were fundamentally Christian and Catholic’.<sup>14</sup>

But how did he come by these ideas? Eliot insisted that he attached ‘significance also to his development, to his beginnings as well as to his ends, and to the movement from one to the other’.<sup>15</sup> It is on that development, on those beginnings, and on the most important period of that movement that this book is focused. The first part of it deals with the years of Chesterton’s obscurity—his childhood, his adolescence, his years as a student and a young adult—not least because this period has been, if not ignored by his biographers, certainly left behind with what seems to me an undue impatience to move on to a period in their subject’s life in which the initials G.K.C. begin to count for something.

We need to understand not simply why Chesterton wanted to say *something* about the world (vulnerable young men always want to do that). The important question to answer, before we can fully elucidate *what* he said, is why he said it. It would, of course, be generally accepted that since his writings were from the beginning closely concerned with the world in which he lived, Chesterton’s published works may legitimately be referred to their immediate social, religious, literary, and historical context (though, as a matter of observable fact, few books about him do anything of the sort). But if we accept that, we have to assume, too, that the period which preceded Chesterton’s earliest published writings was also one in which social, literary, religious, and historical context is at least as important as isolated biographical detail to our understanding of how he came to write as he did.

<sup>13</sup> See pp. 69–70 below.

<sup>14</sup> Conlon, 532.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 531.

We must, of course, as all his biographers do, evoke Chesterton's early years as nearly as we can by recalling the happiness of his childhood and adolescence and the spiritual crisis of his student years. But that childhood, and that spiritual crisis, were deeply rooted in their times; we need to see more clearly than we do that the spirit of the age in which he grew to manhood had a deep effect on Chesterton's personal and intellectual development and on the kind of writer he became: for once we have seen that, we will be able to perceive more clearly, behind the Edwardian journalist, popular versifier, and minor novelist, a more substantial and more prophetic figure, whose proper place is not with such petty luminaries as Max Beerbohm and John Galsworthy, or even with H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, but with those great Victorians who epitomised their age by standing in fundamental opposition to it. We can apply directly to Chesterton his own words about the painter G. F. Watts: 'He has the one great certainty which marks off all the great Victorians from those who have come after them: he may not be certain that he is successful, or certain that he is great, or certain that he is good, or certain that he is capable: but he is certain that he is right.'<sup>16</sup> My judgement is that of Ian Ker: that we need to see 'the non-fiction prose writer, the Chesterton who wrote such studies as *Charles Dickens* (1906), *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913) and *St Thomas Aquinas* (1933), as well as the apologetic classics *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *The Everlasting Man* (1925), as a successor to the great Victorian "sages" or "prophets", who was indeed often compared to Dr Johnson in his own lifetime, and who can be mentioned without exaggeration in the same breath as Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and especially, of course, Newman'.<sup>17</sup> This prophetic cast of mind, I hope to show, had been fully formed by the time he wrote *Orthodoxy*: with Ian Ker's judgement we can place that of another of Newman's biographers—the first, Wilfrid Ward—who in an extended review of *Orthodoxy*, significantly entitled 'Mr Chesterton among the Prophets', classed 'his thought—though not his manner—with that of such men as Burke, Butler and Coleridge',<sup>18</sup> and who also, more than once, made the inevitable comparison with Newman himself.

The aim of this book is to trace the growth of Chesterton's mind from early childhood to the point in his literary career at which, as I shall argue,

<sup>16</sup> G. F. Watts (London, 1904), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Ker, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961* (Notre Dame, Ind., 2003), 75.

<sup>18</sup> Wilfrid Ward, 'Mr Chesterton among the Prophets', *Dublin Review*, 144 (Jan. and Apr., 1909), 1.

he had fully established the intellectual foundations on which the massive oeuvre of his last three decades was to be built. My study is inevitably organised and written in biographical form, though there are differences to be noted from the biographies which have so far appeared. A general biography must inevitably be a kind of catch-all, organising chronologically any material which comes to hand: endearing anecdotes, love letters, holiday reminiscences, the posthumous memories of friends. Much of such material may be of value: but its cornucopian assembly inevitably brings, to a greater or lesser extent, a certain loss of focus on the one part of a writer which is of lasting importance: his writings. In the case of some biographies of Chesterton, his writings can seem like events in his life to be listed with all the other events: they somehow emerge and are published, and contribute to his growing reputation: but as to why they were written, or how they relate to each other as part of a growing corpus which more and more indicates the lineaments of a developing human intellect, hardly more than desultory enquiries have generally been made. With one exception, I have found existing biographies of little help in my own study. The exception, however, is an important one: *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, by Maisie Ward, itself the principal source (whether acknowledged or not) for all subsequent biographies. This has been an indispensable source to those who have followed for two reasons. First, because of the closeness of biographer and subject. Maisie Ward knew Chesterton and his wife well; her father Wilfrid Ward had become a close personal friend; after his death, she had access to most of Chesterton's friends, who as she sat, notebook in hand, generously showered her with their personal reminiscences. Secondly, this closeness gave her the active cooperation of Chesterton's secretary Dorothy Collins, who acted, in a sense, as a kind of research assistant by making for her 'a selection . . . of the most important among the immense mass of notebooks and papers'. This was, comments Maisie Ward, 'well and truly done, despite falling bombs and over-warwork'.<sup>19</sup> From this selection, Maisie Ward made her own for the biography itself, often quoting copiously. This process of selection has governed the way in which the Chesterton papers have been used subsequently, for whenever they are quoted, it is generally from Ward rather than directly from the papers themselves. The reasons for this are not hard to understand: in this 'immense mass' of material, then uncatalogued and disorganised, it has been very difficult for

<sup>19</sup> *Return*, 4.

a researcher to find their way; even those biographers, like Michael Ffinch, who have worked directly on the notebooks and papers (living, in Ffinch's case, for several weeks in Chesterton's attic in Beaconsfield) have not managed to do more than skim the surface of what they contain, extracting from this lucky dip a valuable new insight here or there.

This situation, however, has now been transformed. After Dorothy Collins's death, nearly all the Chesterton papers were acquired by the British Library and catalogued by Dr R. A. Christophers. Dr Christophers's printed catalogue<sup>20</sup> (which, for instance, lists every item in each of the hundreds of notebooks, page by page) contains over 100 pages of indexes. This substantial labour, it is not too much to say, has established the foundations on which all future Chesterton scholarship will be built; it is now possible to conduct serious enquiries, topic by topic, into what new insights the papers may contain. I have been able to quote at length directly from the papers themselves as well as from Maisie Ward's selection of them, though this has not always been possible since, as Dr Christophers points out, 'it appears that some material, once it was used by Ward or copied into typescript, was not retained'.<sup>21</sup> This could be explained by the fact that the offices of Sheed and Ward (where Maisie Ward worked on the book) sustained a direct hit during wartime bombing, and many papers were destroyed. Whatever the reason, it is not always possible to find passages quoted from Chesterton's papers by Maisie Ward in the British Library's Chesterton collection. This matters less than it might seem. Wherever one can verify Ward's use of the papers, it seems faithful enough (though inevitably, as we shall see, her selection reflects her own perspective); and there is much left for future generations to work on. A good start has been made on the papers by Professor Denis Conlon, who has transcribed and published a good body of poems (mostly in the *G. K. Chesterton Quarterly*) and stories (in volume xiv of the Ignatius Press *Collected Works*): his discoveries include an entire novel, now published separately.<sup>22</sup> This new material is mostly from the 1890s, perhaps the decade with the greatest potential for new discoveries.

The establishment and cataloguing of the British Library's collection has come at a fortunate juncture, for Chesterton scholarship is, in a sense, in its

<sup>20</sup> ISBN 0 7123 4677 5.

<sup>21</sup> R. A. Christophers, *The British Library Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts: The G. K. Chesterton Papers* (London, 2001), p. x.

<sup>22</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Basil Howe: A Story of Young Love* (London, 2001).

infancy. Though Gilbert Keith Chesterton died over seventy years ago, little serious work has been done on the implications of his writings. Although, especially in America, his reputation is growing, his works are even now rarely studied in university courses either in literature—despite such judgements as Shaw’s of his ‘colossal genius’—or theology—despite the clear and established phenomenon of his success as an apologist: Étienne Gilson called *Orthodoxy* ‘the best piece of apologetic the century [has] produced’; it brought Dorothy L. Sayers back to Christianity, just as *The Everlasting Man* brought C. S. Lewis to his famous moment of conversion on Headington Hill. Much remains to be done before Chesterton’s huge oeuvre can be adequately assessed as a major part of the cultural history of the last century. The academic embargo against recognition of Chesterton’s stature remains in place, for reasons which remain a matter of speculation. Thus, despite the current growth of interest in his life and works, when, as late as 2007, the *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* appeared, it contained no chapter, or even a paragraph, on Chesterton.

Most writers on such a major figure, writing seventy years after his death, would at the outset find it appropriate to describe in some preliminary way an existing body of scholarly writing, to which they have been in some way indebted, and to which their own endeavour was intended either as a response or an addition. With the exceptions I have noted, however, I have not been able to build on any existing scholarly foundation. A handful of useful articles, introductions, even a few books (as well as the biographies already mentioned) have appeared over the years; to these, reference will be made at the appropriate juncture. Apart from Maisie Ward’s, one work warrants mention here: Denis Conlon’s *G. K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgements* (1976), on which most biographers who have written since it appeared have relied for their understanding of the contemporary response to Chesterton’s works (though for obvious reasons, Professor Conlon was unable to include one notable critical essay because of its length, Wilfrid Ward’s important thirty-two-page review of *Orthodoxy* in the *Dublin Review*). But there is little else which can be described as indispensable. To a writer whose first book was on Charles Dickens (about whom there was, even then, thirty-five years ago, a massive critical and scholarly literature to take into account), the contrast has been more than merely striking. In some ways, however, this is a situation which has been not entirely without its attractions. Much of this book’s available basic materials—manuscript notebooks and correspondence, the diary

Chesterton kept for a short time as a boy, the files of *The Debater* (the magazine he co-founded at St Paul's School) to which he was the most frequent contributor, even, astonishingly, his uncollected journalism (far more extensive in terms of the number of words written than the books published over the same period)—have been (for the most part) either casually dipped into or virtually unused by others; this gives a certain freedom of action and choice to the writer who first draws on these unpublished or uncollected materials to anything like the extent necessary if the story of the growth of this extraordinary and unique mind is adequately to be told. A number of acknowledgements must be made here: above all to Dr Christophers for his catalogue and to the staff of the Manuscripts Room at the British Library for their unfailing courtesy and helpfulness, and to A. P. Watt Ltd on behalf of the Royal Literary Fund, for permission to quote unpublished material from the Chesterton Papers. I am grateful to the staff of the British Library's newspaper library at Colindale, and that of the Bodleian Library. I owe a special debt of gratitude to David Bussey, the archivist of St Paul's School, who not only gave me access to the school's Chesterton archive and carried out research on my behalf in the surviving records of Chesterton's school career, but also arranged for the photocopying of the bound volumes of the full run of *The Debater* magazine. I am grateful, too, to Professor Denis Conlon and to Aidan Mackey, both of whom kindly read my typescript and made a number of invaluable suggestions. Finally, I have to thank Ian Ker, who read the book chapter by chapter as I produced its first draft, and who has been unfailing in his wisdom and in his kindness and encouragement.

# I

## The Man with the Golden Key, 1874–83

I regret that I have no gloomy and savage father to offer to the public gaze as the true cause of all my tragic heritage; no pale-faced and partially poisoned mother whose suicidal instincts have cursed me with the temptations of the artistic temperament. . . . I cannot do my duty as a true modern by cursing everybody who made me whatever I am. I am not clear what that is; but I am pretty sure that most of it is my own fault.<sup>1</sup>

The ignorant pronounce it Frood,  
To cavil or applaud.  
The well-informed pronounce it Froyd  
But I pronounce it Fraud

(‘On Professor Freud’)<sup>2</sup>

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born on 29 May 1874, in Sheffield Terrace, Campden Hill. His father was by profession ‘the head’ as Chesterton later put it, ‘of a hereditary business of house-agents and surveyors’—though signs of heart trouble early in life had led his medical advisers (including a Harley Street consultant) to insist that work could be fatal, and he had withdrawn from the active conduct of the firm’s affairs. This probably came as something of a relief to him: Edward Chesterton had always regretted that he had entered the family firm rather than following his own ambition to become an artist; he spent the rest of his life, between occasional visits to the office, pursuing a wide variety of intellectual and artistic pursuits. If he had been a Frenchman, he would have been described as an intellectual; and he was, in this period of the Victorian era, by no means as unusual in this as we might suppose. ‘During the second half of the nineteenth century’, wrote Gilbert’s younger brother Cecil, ‘the middle class was absolutely bubbling over with ideas. . . . It was rioting in its new-found intellectual

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Works*, x, 508.



liberty as heartily as the men of the Restoration rioted in their new-found moral liberty. Everywhere you found households where new theories of politics, philosophy, religion, or science were eagerly welcomed, debated, and assimilated. Most of us have come across dozens of such households. Into such a household . . . G.K.C. was born.<sup>3</sup>

No. 11 Warwick Gardens, where the family moved when Gilbert was 5, was not by some Kensington standards a large house, but it was clearly a happy one, which had about it an air of solid warmth and expansiveness. Cecil's wife Ada remembered it from a later time, but her description of it probably conveys accurately enough the appearance and atmosphere of the house as it was during much of Gilbert's childhood:

The Chestertons' house in Warwick Gardens, the home of Gilbert and Cecil for years, stood out from its neighbours. As you turned the corner of the street you had a glimpse of flowers in dark green window boxes and the sheen of paint the colour of West country bricks, that seemed to hold the sunshine. The setting of the home never altered. The walls of the dining room renewed their original shade of bronze green year after year. The mantel-board was perennially wine-colour, and the tiles of the hearth, Edward Chesterton's own design, grew more and more mellow.

Books lined as much of the wall space as was feasible and the shelves reached from floor to ceiling in a phalanx of leather. The furniture was graceful, a slim mahogany dining-table, a small sideboard, generously stocked with admirable bottles, and deep chairs.

The portrait of G.K. as a child smiled from a wall facing the fireplace. Walking with his father in Kensington gardens, the fair and radiant beauty of the boy, the flowing curls and graceful poise, held the eyes of the Italian artist, Bacceni, who did not rest until he had conveyed the vision to canvas. . . .

On party nights wide folding doors stood open and through the vista of a warm yet delicate rose-coloured drawing-room you saw a long and lovely garden, burgeoning with jasmine and syringa, blue and yellow iris, climbing roses and rock plants. The walls were high, and tall trees stood sentinel at the far end.<sup>4</sup>

There was a contrast between the image presented by Edward Chesterton to the outside world and the reality of the life he lived behind the dark green window boxes of 11 Warwick Gardens. 'He was known to the world', recalled Gilbert later, 'and even the next-door neighbours, as a very reliable and capable though rather unambitious business man.' But to his sons, Gilbert continued, he was 'the Man with the Golden Key, a magician opening the gates of goblin castles or the sepulchres of dead heroes'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cecil, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ada Chesterton, *The Chestertons* (London, 1941), 19–20.

<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography*, 38.

Chesterton's father—known affectionately to the family as 'Mister' or 'Mr Ed'—had a huge, and in many ways definitive, intellectual influence on him, and this emerges unmistakably in the opening chapters of the *Autobiography*; but it is necessary to say, before anything else, that this influence was built on the foundation of Gilbert's emotional relationship with both his parents, the depth of which he himself—understandably—implied rather than stated. To acute observers like Edmund Clerihew Bentley—Gilbert's closest friend from the age of 9 until the end of his life—it was very clear. 'Family affection', Bentley wrote, in a memoir published in *The Spectator* immediately after Gilbert's death, '... was the cradle of that immense benevolence that lived in him. I have never met with parental devotion or conjugal sympathy more strong than they were in the exceptional woman who was his mother; or with greater kindness—to say nothing of other sterling qualities—than that of his father, the business man whose feeling for literature and all beautiful things worked so much upon his sons in childhood.' The spell of 11 Warwick Gardens was felt beyond the family itself. Bentley adds that 'The parents made their home a place of happiness for their two boys' many friends, a place that none of them can ever have forgotten.'<sup>6</sup>

Chesterton's mother was a woman of strong character, and to those who did not know her, of slightly alarming personality. Gilbert's friends found her kind but somewhat forbidding in appearance, 'her clothes thrown on anyhow, and with blackened and protruding teeth which gave her a witchlike appearance'.<sup>7</sup> Marie Louise was not a stickler for order and cleanliness. The house was untidy. More to the point, she did not see it as any part of her duties to teach her boys orderly habits. As Maisie Ward puts it, 'They had not the training that a strict mother or an efficient nurse usually accomplishes with the most refractory. Gilbert was never refractory, merely absent-minded; but it is doubtful whether he was sent upstairs to wash his hands or brush his hair. . . . And it is perfectly certain that he ought to have been so sent several times a day.'<sup>8</sup> He was frequently late for meals, but never rebuked. One has the impression that though, in the words of Annie Firmin, one of Gilbert's childhood playmates, 'Aunt Marie was a bit of a tyrant in her own family',<sup>9</sup> her boys—especially, perhaps, Cecil, to whom

<sup>6</sup> E. C. Bentley, signed obituary, *The Spectator* (19 July 1936), 1125–6; Conlon, 525–7.

<sup>7</sup> Ward, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

she was closest, just as Gilbert was closest to his father—were treated with a possibly excessive indulgence.

The Chesterton home must have been a magical place for a child to grow up in; and at the centre of it all was the benign and amazingly diverse creativity of Edward Chesterton. On special occasions, Ada Chesterton remembered him hanging up fairy lamps in the garden, ‘in absurd and ravishing loops among the flowers and trees’.<sup>10</sup> ‘His den or study’, remembered Gilbert, ‘was piled high with the stratified layers of about ten or twelve creative amusements; water-colour painting and modelling and photography and stained glass and fretwork and magic lanterns and mediaeval illumination.’<sup>11</sup> His many artistic and intellectual activities were described by Gilbert himself as his ‘hobbies’; but he emphasised that this was not intended to diminish their dignity or importance: ‘A hobby is not a holiday. It is not merely a momentary relaxation necessary to the renewal of work. . . . a hobby is not half a day but half a life-time. It would be truer to accuse the hobbyist of living a double life. And hobbies, especially such hobbies as the toy theatre, have a character that runs parallel to practical professional effort, and is not merely a reaction from it. It is not merely taking exercise; it is doing work.’<sup>12</sup>

### ‘The permanent anticipation of surprise’

Gilbert in later life thought of himself as a bohemian, and this is probably as good a description of his parents as any. Gilbert remembered that his father one day ‘remarked casually that he had been asked to go on what was then called The Vestry. At this my mother, who was more swift, restless and generally Radical in her instincts, uttered something like a cry of pain; she said, “Oh, Edward, don’t! You will be so respectable! We never have been respectable yet; don’t let’s begin now.” And I remember my father mildly replying, “My dear, you present a rather alarming picture of our lives, if you say that we have never for one single instant been respectable.” Readers of *Pride and Prejudice* will perceive that there was something of Mr. Bennet about my father; though there was certainly nothing of Mrs. Bennet about my mother.’<sup>13</sup> Cecil, indeed, claimed of their mother that ‘anyone who

<sup>10</sup> Chesterton, *The Chestertons*, 20–1.

<sup>11</sup> *Autobiography*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 39.      <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 6–7.

wishes to know from whence G.K.C. gets his wit need only listen for a few minutes to her conversation'; Gilbert, however, makes clear that his father, too, was a humorist of considerable stature:

He was rather quiet than otherwise, but his quietude covered a great fertility of notions; and he certainly liked taking a rise out of people. I remember, to give one example of a hundred such inventions, how he gravely instructed some grave ladies in the names of flowers; dwelling especially on the rustic names given in certain localities. 'The country people call them Sailors' Pen-knives,' he would say in an offhand manner, after affecting to provide them with the full scientific name, or, 'They call them Bakers' Bootlaces down in Lincolnshire, I believe'; and it is a fine example of human simplicity to note how far he found he could safely go in such instructive discourse. They followed him without revulsion when he said lightly, 'Merely a sprig of wild bigamy.' It was only when he added that there was a local variety known as Bishop's Bigamy that the full depravity of his character began to dawn on their minds. It was possibly this aspect of his unfailing amiability that is responsible for an entry I find in an ancient minute-book, of mock trials conducted by himself and his brothers; that Edward Chesterton was tried for the crime of Aggravation. But the same sort of invention created for children the permanent anticipation of what is profoundly called a Surprise. And it is this side of the business that is relevant here.<sup>14</sup>

This permanent anticipation of surprise was induced by Chesterton's father in a number of ways; and it was an aspect of his influence that encouraged what was to become an essential characteristic of Gilbert's adult intellect and imagination. It was at the root of his religious apologetic; and it was the driving force of his almost unconscious tendency towards the unearthing of paradox in apparently unfruitful soil. The expectation that the everyday is the gateway to the unforeseen, that normality is a kind of veil hiding the possibility of surprise, even of wonder, is the underlying theme of the first two chapters of the *Autobiography*; and as I shall show, the contemporary evidence is that, though these features of the Chestertonian imagination were not to become explicit until he was already an established writer in the early years of the twentieth century, and though Chesterton's memories of childhood were written nearly six decades after the period they so vividly evoke, they do convey the reality of what they describe: Chesterton's own version of his childhood is not a semi-fictional reconstruction (as his account of several episodes in his later life can be shown to be) but a sometimes profound meditation on a reality authentically recalled.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 36-7.

## The view through the proscenium arch

The expectation of surprise was by no means the only way in which Chesterton's imaginative and intellectual inclinations were affected by his father's influence; another is represented—and according to Chesterton himself actually formed—by the huge toy theatre (about five feet high) his father made, which Gilbert preserved carefully throughout his life and used later on to give regular performances at the children's parties he gave in Beaconsfield (from which parents were rigorously excluded). The toy theatre symbolised something essential about his childhood that remained always with him as an adult; and at the most obvious level, the reason for this is clear enough. There is no sinister Freudian reason for it; as he insisted himself, 'If some laborious reader of little books on child-psychology cries out to me in glee and cunning, "You only like romantic things like toy-theatres because your father showed you a toy-theatre in your childhood," I shall reply . . . simply that I associate these things with happiness because I was so happy. . . . the question [is] why I was so happy.'<sup>15</sup> Cecil Chesterton cites his love of toy theatres simply as a symptom of his 'romanticism'.<sup>16</sup> Chesterton himself, in a passage of self-analysis that has about it the feeling of a long-pondered-over conclusion, takes the subject a good deal more seriously than that. The second chapter of the *Autobiography* opens with his famous vision, inspired by one of his father's toy-theatre performances, of 'The very first thing I can ever remember seeing with my own Eyes': this was 'a young man walking across a bridge' who 'carried in his hand a disproportionately large key of a shining yellow metal and wore a large golden or gilded crown. The bridge he was crossing sprang on the one side from the edge of a highly perilous mountain chasm, the peaks of the range rising fantastically in the distance; and at the other end it joined the upper part of the tower of an almost excessively castellated castle. In the castle tower there was one window, out of which a young lady was looking. I cannot remember in the least what she looked like; but I will do battle with anyone who denies her superlative good looks.' Chesterton makes two very different kinds of point about this memory. The first is the most obvious one: that by means of the toy theatre, his father could transform the home of a house-agent 'living immediately to the north of Kensington

<sup>15</sup> *Autobiography*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Cecil, 251.

High Street' into 'a glimpse of some incredible paradise' which 'for all I know, I shall still remember . . . when all other memory is gone out of my mind'. But there is also in Chesterton's analysis a very different kind of perception of the toy theatre's formative intellectual influence on him. It is not simply that it gave him the entry into a fantastic alternative world of the imagination: it is also that it instilled a particular way of perceiving the world of everyday sense:

Apart from the fact of it being my first memory, I have several reasons for putting it first. I am no psychologist, thank God; but if psychologists are still saying what ordinary sane people have always said—that early impressions count considerably in life—I recognise a sort of symbol of all that I happen to like in imagery and ideas. All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window.

This 'love of frames and limits' was another essential feature of the Chestertonian imagination; it runs like a leitmotif throughout his intellectual life. Like the expectation of surprise, it was a guiding principle of his mature religious apologetic. It was also at the root of his first fully developed polemical attitude: his intensely anti-imperialist brand of English patriotism. 'An empire', he wrote in an essay published in 1904, is above all 'utterly undefined and unlimited. Not to see how this frustrates genuine enthusiasm is not to know the alphabet of the human heart. There is one thing that is vitally essential to everything which is to be intensely enjoyed or intensely admired—limitation. Whenever we look through an archway, and are stricken into delight with the magnetic clarity and completeness of the landscape beyond, we are realising the necessity of boundaries. Whenever we put a picture in a frame, we are acting upon that primeval truth which is the value of small nationalities.'<sup>17</sup> Gilbert's love of seeing things within a frame can be traced not only to his father's toy theatres but also in one quite specific way to his direct imaginative influence: Gilbert's fascination, throughout his life, with a book for children his father both wrote and illustrated, entitled *The Wonderful Story of Dunder van Haeden*:

One of the sports of the imagination, a game I have played all my life, was to take a certain book with pictures of old Dutch houses, and think not of what was in the pictures but of all that was out of the pictures, the unknown corners and side-streets of the same quaint town.

<sup>17</sup> Lucian Oldershaw (ed.), *England: A Nation* (London, 1904), 16–17.

This indicates a principle which was to become more and more evident to Chesterton: that the function of limitation, of 'frames and limits', was precisely that it made possible the imaginative transcendence of the area thus confined. The point about the frame or the archway was that what could be seen led on to what could be imagined beyond its confines: tangible and definable reality, that is, was the gateway to the intangible and the undefinable. This is a property of Chesterton's imagination which we can without exaggeration describe as quasi-sacramental—a tendency which we can see as being a kind of predisposing factor in what Cecil called the 'drift towards orthodoxy' which was to establish itself in Gilbert's mind during the first seven or eight years of the twentieth century.

Given his father's evident influence over Chesterton's imaginative development, *The Wonderful Story of Dunder van Haeden* is worth some attention at this point:

The book was one my father had written and illustrated himself, merely for home consumption. It was typical of him that, in the Pugin period he had worked at Gothic illumination; but when he tried again, it was in another style of the dark Dutch renaissance, the grotesque scroll-work that suggests woodcarving more than stone-cutting. He was the sort of man who likes to try everything once. This was the only book he ever wrote; and he never bothered to publish it.<sup>18</sup>

Why Chesterton should have thought that his father never bothered to publish his book is something of a puzzle, since it was indeed published, not privately, but by R. Brimley Johnson, a perfectly respectable commercial publisher, in 1901 (in fact, it was Frances, Chesterton's wife, who persuaded her father-in-law to have the book published: the copy with which he presented her is inscribed 'Frances Chesterton, with the author's love, Nov 1901. (All your fault!)'.<sup>19</sup> It is certainly true that at the time Chesterton, a newly successful writer who was already, at an energetic pace, profusely turning out books and articles to keep his head above water financially, had a lot on his mind: but he can hardly have missed the publication by his own father of a book which had meant—and by his own account was to continue to mean—so much to him, providing, as he recalled toward the end of his life, 'one of the sports of my imagination, a game I have played all my life'. What seems clear, though, is that he knew the book not from one of the printed copies but from its original manuscript (now in the British Library's Chesterton collection).

<sup>18</sup> *Autobiography*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Now in the collection of Mr Aidan Mackey.

Whatever the solution of this puzzle, the book itself provides ample explanation not only for Chesterton's fascination with it, but for Edward Chesterton's intellectual and imaginative influence over his sons. We know little about 'Mr Ed' but what Gilbert wrote in the *Autobiography*, and what Cecil wrote in his own book about his brother—much of which, perhaps, we tend to explain away as being due to filial piety. We can see that he was an amusing and lovable man—as Gilbert suggests, rather after the manner of Jane Austen's Mr Bennet. This book, however, establishes something more: that he was seriously talented—an accomplished and painstaking draughtsman (possibly more accomplished, and certainly more painstaking, than his son), and a story teller of charm and imagination.

*The Wonderful Story of Dunder van Haeden* is a moral tale told with a light touch. Its hero, the father of seven daughters, is not unreminiscent of Mr Ed himself:

... the worthy old man was so learned and clever  
That he always was reading and writing for ever,  
He was busier than any who work at a trade  
And had read all the books that had ever been made.<sup>20</sup>

The 'worthy old man' is writing 'an exceedingly wonderful book', in his study, which appears in the first of the book's eight beautifully drawn pen-and-ink illustrations, a room not unreminiscent of Mr Ed's study as Gilbert describes it: it is untidy, full of piles of books on tables and on the floor: a stuffed stork sits on a small shelf and other curious objects sit on the mantelshelf and on every other conceivable surface. Dunder van Haeden is seated before a huge open volume in which he is writing with a quill pen; he is smoking a large curly pipe and wearing a full-length garment, dark glasses, and a round smoking cap.

His seven daughters, though good and industrious, have a tendency to become noisy and hysterical whenever they make a mistake in their dress-making (by which they make their living):

So Dunder van Haeden would quietly say  
To his daughters, that if they behaved in that way,  
Some day they would certainly scream off his head;  
He knew before long he should lose it, he said.  
Every shriek made it more and more loose on his shoulders,

<sup>20</sup> Edward Chesterton, *The Wonderful Story of Dunder van Haeden* (London, 1902), 1.



It would come off at last to surprise the beholders.  
 And then, if his head from his body they took,  
 What was to become of his wonderful book?<sup>21</sup>

Predictably, the daughters continue in their noisy ways

Till one day when a sister had made some great blunder,  
 And the seven all began to shout louder than thunder;  
 Then the head of Papa, what I tell you is true,  
 Bounced off, and right out of the window it flew.<sup>22</sup>

The illustration facing this is very funny and beautifully drawn. We see one of the Dutch street scenes that Gilbert refers to, that made him ‘think not of what was in the pictures but of all that was out of the pictures, the unknown corners and side-streets of the same quaint town’. Gabled houses and an elaborate roofscape with many spires on the left of the picture sit next to a close-up of the gable end of the van Haeden residence, on the right; crowded into one window, we see his seven daughters anxiously looking out; through the adjacent window we see the headless body of their father, seated at his desk with quill pen in hand; flying through the air is his head, still puffing away at his large curly pipe. A crowd (dressed in sixteenth-century costume) look up dispassionately. Interestingly, though Gilbert refers to his father’s fascinating volume as ‘a certain book with pictures of old Dutch houses’, only two of its eight illustrations are street scenes, though one (which shows Dunder van Haeden’s head flying back onto his shoulders again after a fairy has noted the girls’ penitence) shows a gable and a church spire through the window. The verse on the facing page is as funny as the illustration; the head

... came down, to the wonder of all the beholders,  
 Went in at the window, and stuck on his shoulders.  
 Making no observation upon its alighting,  
 He took up his pen and went on with his writing!<sup>23</sup>

The tale has its moral (‘Now, all little maidens should learn from this song | Not to scream when one thing or another goes wrong<sup>24</sup>’); Gilbert, of course, approved of moral tales for children, insisting that ‘It is quite false to say that the child dislikes a fable that has a moral. Very often he likes the moral more than the fable.’<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Edward Chesterton, *The Wonderful Story of Dunder van Haeden* (London, 1902), 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Autobiography*, 42.

## ‘Literary Composition among Boys’

*Dunder van Haeden* undoubtedly captured Gilbert’s imagination, and it is interesting for that reason; it is even more interesting, perhaps, for what it tells us about the mind and personality of Edward Chesterton. It is not simply the fact that his father wrote, drew, and painted (and made toy theatres and all the other things he created) which helps to explain why Gilbert should have wanted to write and draw from his earliest years; just as important, perhaps, was the fact that he did these things *well*. Even more important was a rather different feature of his father’s intellectual influence over him, what Bentley meant when he referred to his ‘feeling for literature and all beautiful things’, which ‘worked so much upon his sons in childhood’. Most important of all, perhaps, was the fact that he read to him constantly before he could read for himself and then, when he could read, that he encouraged him to learn lengthy passages—particularly of poetry—by heart.

The idea has grown up among Chesterton’s biographers that he was a backward child who learned to read unusually late. This notion probably originates with Maisie Ward, who states baldly that there was from his unusual childhood ‘a result often to be noted in the childhood of exceptional men: a combination of backwardness and precocity. Gilbert Chesterton was in some ways a very backward child . . . He learnt to read only at eight.’<sup>26</sup> She gives no evidence for this; and it has to be said that there is good evidence directly to the contrary, which not only suggests that he was reading well before the age of 8, but which strongly indicates that he was writing stories at the latest by the age of 6 and probably sooner, and quoting poetry that he had learned by heart not long afterwards. By the age of 8, he was writing tidily in cursive script; there has survived an exercise book<sup>27</sup> which belongs either to his early days at prep school or (more likely) to the period immediately before it. Inside the cover, in the handwriting of Dorothy Collins, Chesterton’s secretary, is inscribed ‘With Miss Seamark | 8 years old’ (information she was presumably given by Chesterton himself). Joseph Pearce assumes that Miss Seamark must have been Gilbert’s form mistress at his prep school, Colet House; but contemporary evidence and later memoirs (such as those of H. A. Sams) do not suggest that Colet

<sup>26</sup> Ward, 14.

<sup>27</sup> BL MS Add. 73315A.

House was any different from other prep schools of the period in having an exclusively male teaching staff. It is much more likely that Miss Seamark was a private tutor, engaged by Edward Chesterton to teach Gilbert at home. The exercise book contains, among other exercises, a number of neatly written passages taken down from dictation; this alone disproves the notion that he was at this age still struggling to read. Spelling mistakes are underlined by Miss Seamark; some are then corrected by Gilbert:

Under this new feeling he built the church of St Michael at Scone and founded a Monstry there; driven by a tenpest to Acmona Isle, in gratitude for his presishalion and for his manetenance by the hermets he dedicated a church there to St Colomb Monastery Monastery Monastery

Preservation, preservation,  
Hermits, Hermits, Hermits,  
Hermits, Hermits, Hermits

The book also contains exercises in grammar: for instance, ‘Words which tell what anything does, or what is done to it, or in what state it is, are called Vearbs.’ Later on, the verb ‘to be’ is written out in full, in its present, past, future, present perfect, and past perfect tenses. Other contents include the English counties with their principal cities. This exercise book gives an interesting insight into the disciplined nature of elementary education at the period; it also allows a comparative dating of three of Gilbert’s notebooks which contain stories from different earlier periods, the earliest (judging by spelling and handwriting) being from two or even three years before the exercise book. There survives evidence, however, of creative endeavour taking place even earlier than that.

In 1892, when he was 18, Gilbert was to read a paper to the St Paul’s School ‘Junior Debating Society’, which he had helped to found, entitled ‘Literary Composition among Boys’. According to the Society’s record of the event, ‘He said that a creative instinct exists in [every child, who] has . . . a series of imaginary characters, whose proceedings he details at enormous lengths, while the desire to let off one’s feelings in the form of composition, he said, comes somewhat later.’<sup>28</sup> Fifteen years earlier—in other words, when he was 3 years old—this ‘desire to let off [his] feelings in the form of composition’ was already expressing itself in the form of a swashbuckling story concerning a boy called ‘Kids’, which his Aunt Rose took down from little Gilbert’s dictation, and faithfully preserved. It is

<sup>28</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘Literary Composition among Boys’, *The Debater*, iii. 89.

divided into two chapters; in the first he kills a giant (there are also boars and dragons). The second chapter, entitled ‘The Boyhood of Kids’, begins, ‘He was dressed for fun in armour, with a short dagger by his side, and his father thought it would only be for fun, but Kids marched off and you could not see him except like a little speck a 100 miles off in the army. He fought and conquered.’<sup>29</sup>

The earliest surviving written composition by Gilbert (probably aged 5 or 6) appears to be a story entitled ‘The Rolling Stone’, and it demonstrates, among other things, a familiarity with the layout of printed books. It begins, on the notebook’s first left-hand page, with a large, chaotic pencil drawing of several huge dragons confronting a tiny man in a long swallow-tailed coat, wielding an axe. Underneath, in large untidy capitals, is the caption: ‘HE RASED HIS AXE’, and below that, in larger capitals, the word ‘FONTISPEECE’. On the right-hand page and overleaf, also in ill-formed capital letters, is the following:

THE ROLING STONE  
AND OTHER TALES  
CHAPTER I

TOMTAP GOT UP THE NEXT MORNING AT IV OCLOCK HE TOOOK WITH HIM A STICK ANDWENT OUT IN THE SNOW (IT WAS WINTER TIME). WHEN HE GOT A LITTLE WAY HE HAD NOTHING POTICULER TO DO HE WAS KICKING A STONE ALONG THE ROAD FOR AMEWSMENT WHEN IT WENT TO FAR AND IT WAS GOING DOWN A VALY AT TH BOTOM OF WHITCH WAS A CAVE I MUST NOT LET IT GO IN THERE SED HE AND HE RAN AS FAST A HE COOD AND SLIPED ON A BIT OF ICE AND ROLD DOWN THE VALY AND INTO THE HOLE AFTER THE STONE. WHEN HE GOT THERE HE FOUND HIMSELF

Here, the written story ends: but on the right-hand page opposite is a well-drawn illustration of a large monkey sitting on the branch of a tree, holding a round object and looking fiercely down at a small boy who is looking up at him. Underneath this is the caption:

R  
‘HE GASPED THE STONE’<sup>30</sup>  
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Gilbert’s childish imagination was undoubtedly fed not only by what he read, but also—perhaps even particularly—by what he learned by heart. His father, he recollected in the *Autobiography*, ‘knew all his English literature

<sup>29</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Story of Kids’, *G. K. Chesterton Quarterly*, 1 (Oct. 1996), 1.

<sup>30</sup> BL MS Add. 73314B.

backwards, and . . . I knew a great deal of it by heart, long before I could really get it into my head. I knew pages of Shakespeare's blank verse without a notion of the meaning of most of it; which is perhaps the right way to begin to appreciate verse. And it is also recorded of me that, at the age of six or seven, I tumbled down in the street in the act of excitedly reciting the words,

Good Hamlet, cast this nighted colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark,  
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust,

at which appropriate moment I pitched forward on my nose.<sup>31</sup> It is likely that Gilbert at this age understood more than he claimed: the *Autobiography* has a persistent tendency towards retrospective self-underestimation; this may demonstrate an admirable humility but can be irritating to anyone attempting to discover the facts. Gilbert was also learning Latin by heart as well as Shakespeare, and though what may be the only known childhood attempt to quote it—in the second of his surviving early stories—may be incorrect in nearly every word, the quotation is still identifiable, and the story it inspired indicates that he had understood its meaning well. Like the earlier story already quoted, this one shows a familiarity with the organisation of printed books; judging by the handwriting (in slightly less chaotic upper and lower case lettering), it can be dated about six to nine months after 'The rolling stone', that is, at about the same period as the incident just quoted, which took place 'at the age of six or seven':

THE WANDERING MONKEY  
CHAPTER I

Syttere tu patulie  
Reculans sublegmine fugi  
virgil

O! the life of a monkey is wild O! he lives in the wood O! he ravages bird's nests O! the forests of tall pines and Orang trees such is the life of a monkey as he swings in the trees O! such was the life of the hero of my story he was sitting on a bough with his mother when he slept and fell his mother did not see him fall and went off there he lay on the moss the tall pines waving above him and the beeches shedding their

<sup>31</sup> *Autobiography*, 12.

nuts like hail on him when a hand seized him he shrieked but was carried shrieking out of the forest he was brought to and taken to the zoological gardens where he was put in a cage

## CHAPTER II

stone walls do not a prism make  
 nor iron bars a cage  
 minds innocent and quiet take  
 this for a hermitage  
 if I have freedom in my love  
 and in my sole am free  
 angels that hover in the air  
 know no shuck liberty

At the zoological gardens he was treated well and enjoyed myself. One day a respectable Rev put his finger in my cage which of couce was bitten

## CHAPTER III

## MASTERY

he captured many thousand guns  
 he wrote the great before his name  
 and ageing only left his sons  
 the recollection of his shame

Though at first they enjoyed themselves they soon got tired.<sup>32</sup>

Here the story ends; like most of Gilbert's childhood attempts, it peters out before coming to any conclusion: to adapt his one-sentence third chapter, at this age, when writing, though at first he enjoyed himself, he soon got tired. But the story does show that he was learning passages by heart, and that he was understanding them. His quotations are not, of course, correct. Incorrect quotation was a habit that persisted throughout life, and its explanation was always the same: that he was drawing from his vast memory and never verified his quotations: what is remarkable, perhaps, is that he got so many right. The passage from Virgil (from the opening two lines of the Eclogues) should read

Tityre, tu patulae  
 Recubans sub tegmine fagi

<sup>32</sup> BL MS Add. 73314A.

This means ‘O Tityrus, you who lie beneath the covering of a beech’: this must have suggested the first chapter of ‘The Wandering Monkey’, in which Gilbert’s hero is seized, lying beneath ‘the beechs shedding their nuts like hail’. His quotation from Richard Lovelace’s famous poem ‘Stone walls do not a prison make’ (even more relevant to the story) is similarly flawed: ‘angels that hover in the air’, for instance, should be ‘Angels alone that soar above’. Again, Gilbert’s quotation bears all the marks of imperfect recollection of a passage learned by heart, of which, nevertheless, the general gist has been understood.

By the age of 6 or 7, then, he was learning passages of poetry by heart; he had already begun a habit which persisted throughout his youth and into his early manhood, of endlessly scribbling fragments of stories interspersed with sketches, normally in pencil. A little later, as well as stories he began to write verse; later still, little essays. And above all, he was expanding his imagination by reading avidly. His brother Cecil remembered that ‘Reading, no less than discussion, was in the air of his home, and from his childhood he was a voracious reader. His memory was . . . almost as astounding as Macaulay’s, and he always had pages of his favourite authors stored in his head. His taste, then as now, was always for the romantic school: Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott (both prose and verse), Macaulay, were the writers he devoured, I think, most eagerly in his boyhood.’<sup>33</sup> He was particularly attracted by Scott’s romantic historical ballads: he later remembered ‘running to school in sheer excitement repeating militant lines of “Marmion”’;<sup>34</sup> he was also fascinated by Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*.<sup>35</sup>

We do not know how early he was reading Macaulay’s and Scott’s historical poetry, but it could have been quite early, possibly before he went to prep school at 8 or 9 years old: certainly, we know of one very notable example of his close reading of verse in the same genre, which in one juvenile poem, possibly written about the age of 8,<sup>36</sup> strikingly influenced his own writing to the point of direct imitation. His inspiration for the poem was *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers* (1849) by William Edmondstone Aytoun, a romantic conservative and passionate Jacobite. *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers* was vastly popular among readers of all ages throughout

<sup>33</sup> Cecil, 23–4.

<sup>34</sup> *Autobiography*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>36</sup> I have been unable to find the manuscript of this poem in the British Library’s Chesterton collection; but according to Maisie Ward, ‘the very immature handwriting and curious spelling mark it as early’. She herself seems to assume that it belongs to the period before Gilbert went to prep school at 8 or 9 years old; the correctness of this impression is confirmed by a comparison with the spelling of the exercise book quoted on p. 26 above.

the second half of the nineteenth century—especially in Scotland, but in England too; it went into a new edition every year for thirty-two years. Its appeal is obvious: the ballads offer swashbuckling adventure, blood and glory, high ideals, heroism, and betrayal, themes which Gilbert was to relish all his life. One poem from the *Lays* that Gilbert clearly read was ‘The Execution of Montrose’, a poem about the dramatic end of James Graham, Marquess of Montrose, who opposed the alliance between the Scottish Covenanters and the Parliamentary forces at the beginning of the English Civil War, and joined King Charles at Oxford in 1643. The Covenanters put a price on his head, dead or alive. Early in 1645, Montrose led a successful campaign against his old enemy, Archibald Campbell, Marquess of Argyll. After years of military campaigning (during which he became a heroic figure throughout Europe) he was defeated and betrayed to the Covenanters. Montrose was taken to Edinburgh, driven by the hangman in a cart through the streets, and hanged at the Mercat Cross on 21 May 1650. His betrayal, death, and manner of dying became a Jacobite legend; as Aytoun chronicled it,

... when [Montrose] came, though pale and wan,  
 He looked so great and high,  
 So noble was his manly front,  
 So calm his steadfast eye;—  
 The rabble rout forebore to shout,  
 And each man held his breath,  
 For well they knew the hero’s soul  
 Was face to face with death . . .

[Then] onwards—always onwards,  
 In silence and in gloom,  
 The dreary pageant laboured,  
 Till it reach’d the house of doom . . .  
 Then, as the Graeme looked upwards,  
 He met the ugly smile  
 Of him who sold his King for gold—  
 The master-fiend Argyle!<sup>37</sup>

The Jacobite politics of all this, of course, were not at all in accordance with the Gladstonian liberalism of the Chesterton household, of which even at this age Gilbert was clearly aware. ‘The childhood of G.K.C.’, states Cecil

<sup>37</sup> William Edmonstone Aytoun, ‘The Execution of Montrose’, in *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers* (Edinburgh, 1849), 36–7.



(himself an infant at the time), ‘coincided more or less with the St. Martin’s Summer of Liberalism, from 1880 to 1885 [Cecil was born in 1879]. Political controversy was so much in the air of the household that even as an infant he must have heard echoes of that last stand of Gladstonian Liberalism.’<sup>38</sup> What is interesting is that at the age of 8 or 9 Gilbert himself should not only absorb the political atmosphere of the household, but it should directly affect his own writing, so that, though he clearly enjoyed the blood and thunder of Aytoun’s ballads, when it came to writing his own ballad under Aytoun’s influence, he rather impressively inverted their political content:<sup>39</sup> throughout his childhood and (as we shall see) his schooldays, Gilbert was a fierce and polemical young anti-Jacobite. In his own ballad, the heroic James Graham becomes ‘false Montrose’, and Archibald Campbell, for Aytoun ‘the master-fiend Argyle’, becomes Gilbert’s warrior hero. There is a religious dimension to note: Montrose, though not himself a Catholic, was something of a hero amongst Catholics: Aytoun quotes ‘the eulogy pronounced upon him by the famous Cardinal de Retz . . . “Montrose, a Scottish nobleman, head of the house of Grahame . . . has sustained in his own country the cause of the King his master, with a greatness of soul that has not found its equal in our age”.’<sup>40</sup> Gilbert’s ballad shows, among much else, how very early in his life not only contemporary liberal politics, but the anti-papist views which sometimes (but by no means inevitably) accompanied them, were being absorbed by him from the endless discussion that was ‘in the air of the household’;<sup>41</sup> the spelling of the poem (reminiscent of the exercise book already quoted) confirms the impression that it could date from around 1882, when he was 8 years old:

Sing of the great Lord Archibald  
 Sing of his glorious name  
 Sing of his covenanting faith  
 And his evelasting fame.  
 One day he summoned all his men  
 To meet on Cruerchin’s brow

<sup>38</sup> Cecil, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Cecil claims nevertheless that ‘though Mr. Chesterton must have been tolerably familiar with religious and political controversies almost before he could speak, it can hardly be supposed that he had developed ideas of his own on these subjects until well on in his schooldays’. Gilbert’s ‘Scottish’ ballad may prove him wrong (Cecil was himself only 3 or 4 when Gilbert wrote it). *Ibid.* 9–10.

<sup>40</sup> Aytoun, *Lays*, 29–30.

<sup>41</sup> Cecil, 9.

Three thousand covenanting chiefs  
 Who no master would allow . . .  
 And he creid (his hand uplifted)  
 'Soldiers of Scotland hear my vow  
 Ere the morning shall have risen  
 I will lay the trators low. . . .  
 Onward let us draw our clamores  
 Let us draw them on our foes  
 Now [w]hen I am threatened with  
 The fate of false Montrose.  
 Drive the trembling Papists backwards  
 Drive away the Tory's hord  
 Let them tell their hous of villians  
 They have felt the Campbell's sword. . . .  
 And we creid unto our master  
 That we'd die and never yield.  
 That same morn we drove right backwards  
 All the servants of the Pope  
 And Our Lord Archibald we saved  
 From a halter and a rope  
 Far and fast fled all the Graemes  
 Fled that cursed tribe who lately  
 Stained there honour and thier names.<sup>42</sup>

## The realism of fairyland

What Gilbert was reading at this period, apart from Aytoun, must for the most part be a matter of conjecture. Macaulay and Scott possibly (though perhaps not until his schooldays). We know that he was learning passages of Shakespeare by heart. He was also reading 'voraciously'; what else did he read? He mentions having loved as a child *The History of Sandford and Merton*, by Thomas Day, a collection of didactic stories about a very good child called Harry Sandford and a naughty, disobedient, untruthful, lazy child called Tommy Merton. The stories are a blend of adventure, practical information, and moral teaching: at the end of the book, Tommy Merton resolves to improve himself; no wonder Gilbert, with his love of stories with a moral at the end, responded to Thomas Day's.<sup>43</sup> Probably somewhat later (perhaps when he was 11 or 12) he read Charles Dickens and W. S. Gilbert:

<sup>42</sup> Ward, 21–2.

<sup>43</sup> *Autobiography*, 42–3.

at his first meeting with Bentley at prep school, he mentions that they talked about literature: perhaps, he surmises, Dickens or the *Bab Ballads*.<sup>44</sup> In his account of the same event in a letter to his fiancée, Frances, he specifies Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*.<sup>45</sup> Apart from these hints, little firm evidence is to be had about what he read as a child, particularly before he went to school. But one key milestone is clearly visible through the mist. We do know that possibly the most important of all his childhood reading—ininitely more important, certainly, than the likes of *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers*—was the Scottish writer George MacDonald. Certainly, this was his own assessment in 1924, over forty years later: 'I for one', he wrote in the introduction to MacDonald's biography by his son, 'can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which has helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed. Of all the stories I have read, including even all the novels of the same novelist, it remains the most real, the most realistic in the sense of the phrase the most like life. It is called *The Princess and the Goblin*.'<sup>46</sup> Any book thus described has to be given more than passing attention by anyone seeking to trace the growth of Chesterton's imaginative and intellectual life.

George MacDonald's story evokes the same world of fantasy, adventure, and moral certainty as Gilbert's memory of the Prince crossing the bridge in one of Mr Ed's toy-theatre performances; even the plot and scenery are similar: it has a Princess in a castle who has to be rescued; the castle is set on 'the edge of a highly perilous mountain chasm'. The perils of the castle, however, come chiefly from a race of hideous and unspeakably wicked goblins who live beneath the ground, and who are plotting to enter the castle by means of a tunnel they are constructing, so that they can seize the Princess and force her into marriage with the repulsive goblin prince, Harelip, heir to the goblin throne: this abduction would, it is made clear, involve the infliction on the Princess of unspeakable cruelties. The goblins are also plotting to divert the course of an underground stream into the workings of a mine, so that the miners, their natural enemies (who are as virtuous as the goblins are depraved), will all be drowned.

<sup>44</sup> *Autobiography*, 56.

<sup>45</sup> Ward, 91–2.

<sup>46</sup> Introduction to Greville M. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London, 1924), 9.

The King, Princess Irene's father (or 'King-papa'), has left her in the castle with a small household, under the care of a nurse and what seems on the face of it to be woefully inadequate protection; but Irene is protected by a magical fairy great-great-grandmother who lives in the attic, and who, despite her great age, has the beauty of a girl in her twenties. This fairy grandmother carries most of the weight of the story's underlying theme. *The Princess and the Goblin* is before anything else a parable about faith and unbelief. The fairy grandmother reveals herself only to those who are ready to believe in her existence, and even then is accessible only when she chooses. This leads even the Princess into momentary doubts: having failed to find her magical attic room again after her first discovery of it, 'sometimes she came almost to the nurse's opinion that she had dreamed all about her; but that fancy never lasted very long. She wondered very much whether she should ever see her again.'<sup>47</sup>

The story's brave Prince is Curdie, the son of a miner, whose heroic status is earned by his courage and acumen. George MacDonald makes it clear that high rank has to reflect not only bravery and virtue but also deeper moral qualities, including the capacity for self-examination and penitence; thus, Curdie having realised that he has been unjust to Irene by refusing to believe her stories of her grandmother and her magical powers, MacDonald democratically grants him princely status—because he has asked for forgiveness, 'you see there is some ground for supposing that Curdie was not a miner only, but a Prince as well'.<sup>48</sup> (In the sequel, *The Princess and Curdie*, he and Irene eventually become King and Queen.)

Belief in the fairy grandmother, Irene learns, means maintaining faith in and obedience to her, even when all the evidence seems to indicate that safety lies in some other course. The grandmother has woven from spiders' webs a thread so thin that it is invisible; this she has attached to the end of a ring which she gives to Irene, in such a way that it will always be there to guide her in time of danger. 'But remember', says the fairy grandmother, 'it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too.'<sup>49</sup>

In due course, the Princess's faith in the thread is sorely tried. When Curdie is in danger, having been captured by the goblin King and Queen,

<sup>47</sup> George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (London: Puffin Classics, 1996), 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 200.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

the fairy grandmother uses the thread to send Irene to the rescue, deep underground. At first, ‘as she went farther and farther into the darkness of the great hollow mountain, she kept thinking more and more about her grandmother. . . . And she became more and more sure that the thread could not have gone there of itself, and that her grandmother must have sent it.’ But the thread leads her to a huge heap of stones, through which it vanishes: ‘For one terrible moment she felt as if her grandmother had forsaken her. The thread . . . had gone where she could no longer follow it—had brought her into a horrible cavern, and there left her! She was forsaken indeed!’<sup>50</sup> But she soon recovers, removes the stones, finds Curdie and leads him to safety. The goblins are in the end destroyed when the waters they have diverted to drown the miners are diverted back into their own underground kingdom; but not before they have terrifyingly broken into the castle from below. Again, Irene is preserved by her magical grandmother’s protection and all ends happily.

What is it about this story which so affected Chesterton that, over four decades later, he could write that *The Princess and the Goblin* ‘made a difference to my whole existence’, and that it ‘helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed’? What was this ‘vision of things’? One obvious answer is suggested by MacDonald’s use of the magic thread as a symbol for the contradictory nature of religious discernment—for the way in which the eye of faith so often leads in the opposite direction to that suggested by merely human instinct or reason. The central theme of MacDonald’s story was thus consistent with other features of Gilbert’s developing imagination that we have noted—the expectation of surprise and the ‘love of frames and limits’ which lead the mind on to realities beyond what can be immediately perceived—in helping to build up the counter-intuitive instinct which lies behind so much of Chesterton’s adult controversial writing.

Chesterton himself appears at first to explain the appeal of *The Princess and the Goblin* rather differently (though consistently with what I have suggested), by identifying in this ‘parable’ what we have already seen from other sources to be a recurrent imaginative theme of his childhood: the imbuing of the everyday with magical properties, the turning of the Golden Key. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that this perception of

<sup>50</sup> George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (London: Puffin Classics, 1996), 154–5.

the commonplace as gateway to magical realms is an essential part of the meaning of the fairy grandmother's thread; as Chesterton puts it in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, MacDonald 'could write fairy-tales that made all experience a fairy-tale. He could give the real sense that every one had the end of an elfin thread that must at last lead them to paradise.'<sup>51</sup> The essential breakthrough in perception is to see that there is a direct line of communication between the imprisoned world of everyday sense and another imaginative dimension in which anything might happen, a dimension that has the power to transform the element in which we ourselves must continue to move:

When I say [*The Princess and the Goblin*] is like life, what I mean is this. It describes a little princess living in a castle in the mountains which is perpetually undermined, so to speak, by subterranean demons who sometimes come up through the cellars. She climbs up the castle stairways to the nursery or the other rooms; but now and again the stairs do not lead to the usual landings, but to a new room she has never seen before, and cannot generally find again. Here a good great-grandmother, who is a sort of fairy godmother, is perpetually spinning and speaking words of understanding and encouragement. When I read it as a child, I felt that the whole thing was happening inside a real human house, not essentially unlike the house I was living in, which also had staircases and rooms and cellars.

MacDonald's fairy story differs from others, Chesterton argues, 'in achieving this particular purpose of making the ordinary staircases and doors and windows into magical things'. Not only doors and windows were thus transmuted: 'Another recurrent image in his romances was a great white horse; the father of the princess had one. . . . To this day I can never see a big white horse in the street without a sudden sense of indescribable things.' But there is more to be said:

the picture of life in this parable is not only truer than the image of a journey like that of the Pilgrim's Progress, it is even truer than the mere image of a siege like that of The Holy War [Bunyan's second spiritual chronicle]. There is something not only imaginative but intimately true about the idea of the goblins being below the house and capable of besieging it from the cellars. When the evil things besieging us do appear they do not appear outside but inside. Anyhow, that simple image of a house that is our home, that is rightly loved as our home, but of which we hardly know the best or the worst, and must always wait for the one and watch for the other, has always remained in my mind as something singularly solid and unanswerable; and was more corroborated than corrected when I came to give a more

<sup>51</sup> *Collected Works*, xv. 487.

definite name to the lady watching over us from the turret, and perhaps to take a more practical view of the goblins under the floor.<sup>52</sup>

At the risk of labouring the point, it is probably worthwhile to register in passing that this later identification of the protective fairy grandmother with the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of a 'more practical view' of how to deal with one's inner goblins (sacramental confession), was what he meant when he spoke of MacDonald's story as giving him 'a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed'.

MacDonald, clearly, occupied a uniquely personal position in Chesterton's developing imaginative and spiritual life. In an article written about a quarter of a century before his 1924 analysis of *The Princess and the Goblin*'s meaning for him, he had expressed his sense of the higher truth of George MacDonald's imaginative world, in a way which seems to refer as much to himself as to his subject: the ordinary moral fairy tale, he argued, 'is an allegory of real life. Dr MacDonald's tales of real life are allegories, or disguised versions, of his fairy tales. It is not that he dresses up men and movements as knights and dragons, but that he thinks that knights and dragons, really existing in the eternal world, are dressed up here as men and movements. It is not the crown, the helmet or the aureole that are to him the fancy dress; it is the top hat and the frock coat that are, as it were, the disguise of the terrestrial stage conspirators.'<sup>53</sup> This may or may not be true of George MacDonald: it could hardly—in the year that it was written (1901)—be bettered as a description of the attitude to contemporary society of the young controversialist who was then emerging into the public arena with such panache, swordstick in hand.

### 'The white light of wonder'

The fairy grandmother of *The Princess and the Goblin* transforms the lives of those whom she protects by two sorts of guidance, both of which are invested by MacDonald with equal symbolic weight. There is the invisible thread; there is also a kind of supernatural lamp, which in times of danger shines out, through the walls, from the attic in which the grandmother lives.

<sup>52</sup> Introduction to MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 9–11.

<sup>53</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'George MacDonald and his Work', *The Daily News* (11 June 1901).

When Irene is lost on the mountain in total darkness, terrified by grotesque creatures, ‘She looked up, and for a moment her terror was lost in astonishment. At first she thought the rising moon had left her place . . . but she soon saw that she was mistaken, for there was no light on the ground at her feet, and no shadow anywhere. But a great silvery globe was hanging in the air; and as she gazed at the lovely thing, her courage revived.’<sup>54</sup> MacDonald’s magical guiding light retained its potency for the adult Chesterton, not simply as a memorable visual image but as a symbol of transcendent truth, of something ‘solid and unanswerable’: ‘Since I first read that story’, he wrote in 1924, ‘some five alternative philosophies of the universe have come to our colleges out of Germany, blowing through the world like the east wind. But for me that castle is still standing in the mountains and the light in its tower is not put out.’<sup>55</sup>

There is a sense in which we can see Chesterton’s whole childhood as having been filled by the symbolic light he saw inextinguishably shining from MacDonald’s mountain fortress. The early chapters of his autobiography seem to be full of the memory of it; and Chesterton’s evocation of this light-filled childhood, six decades later—an account entirely devoid of sentimentality or false nostalgia—is written with such conviction that we cannot fail to see that if we are to understand the sources of his imaginative life, we must take his childhood as seriously as he did himself:

To me my whole childhood has a certain quality, which may be indescribable but is not in the least vague. . . . [it] was of quite a different kind, or quality, from the rest of my very undeservedly pleasant and cheerful existence.

Of this positive quality the most general attribute was clearness. Here it is that I differ, for instance, from Stevenson, whom I so warmly admire; and who speaks of the child as moving with his head in a cloud. He talks of the child as normally in a dazed daydream, in which he cannot distinguish fancy from fact. Now children and adults are both fanciful at times; but that is not what, in my mind and memory, distinguishes adults from children. Mine is a memory of a sort of white light on everything, cutting things out very clearly, and rather emphasising their solidity. The point is that the white light had a sort of wonder in it, as if the world were as new as myself; but not that the world was anything but a real world. . . . There was something of an eternal morning about the mood.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> MacDonald, *Princess*, 107–8.

<sup>55</sup> Introduction to MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Autobiography*, 44–5.



The *Autobiography* was Chesterton's last book; it appeared after his death. For the most part, it tells us little, directly, about the course of his life. The anonymous reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement* rightly commented that though it was one of his best books, he was not the ideal autobiographer, since 'the proper autobiographer is an egoist': '[Chesterton] recalls with pleasure his schoolmates; he gives the liveliest pictures of his friends . . . and the interesting public figures he encountered . . . what he is shy of producing is himself.'<sup>57</sup> Except, it has to be said, for two important chapters: that in which he recalls the spiritual crisis he underwent during his time at the Slade School of Art; and the book's second chapter, about his childhood, by common consent the best part of the book. This important chapter is at the heart of Chesterton's quest in the *Autobiography* for the understanding of his own life; indeed, there is a sense in which the rest of the book is mostly an entertaining way of filling up the pages. It vividly conveys his conviction that it was from the rediscovery of the clarity and solidity of his childhood perceptions, of what he elsewhere calls the 'white light of wonder'<sup>58</sup>—which he remembers as playing on the toy theatre and all the other keys to the opening of his mind—that his adult vision of life sprang forth as from an underground source. His account of his crisis at the Slade shows him emerging from a time of confusion and darkness by means of what seems at first to be a new discovery, but which turns out after all to be the re-emergence of something he has always known: as he recalls it, it seemed to him that 'At the back of our brains . . . there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man might suddenly understand that he was alive, and be happy.'<sup>59</sup> The *TLS* reviewer of the *Autobiography* concluded that 'The other articles of the Chestertonian creed fall into place once this ruling principle of "wonder in all things" . . . is firmly grasped'.<sup>60</sup> But he was thinking, not of the 20-year-old Chesterton's relieved discovery that after all he was an optimist, but of a key passage in his later evocation of early childhood:

I have never lost the sense that this was my real life; the real beginning of what should have been a more real life; a lost experience in the land of the living. It seems

<sup>57</sup> Unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement* (7 Nov. 1936); Conlon, 540.

<sup>58</sup> *Autobiography*, 46.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 91–2.

<sup>60</sup> Unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement* (7 Nov. 1936); Conlon, 542.

to me that when I came out of the house and stood on that hill of houses, where the roads sank steeply towards Holland Park, and terraces of new red houses could look out across a vast hollow and see far away the sparkle of the Crystal Palace (and seeing it was a juvenile sport in those parts), I was subconsciously certain then, as I am consciously certain now, that there was the white and solid road and the worthy beginning of the life of man; and that it is man who afterwards darkens it with dreams or goes astray from it in self-deception. It is only the grown man who lives a life of make-believe and pretending; and it is he who has his head in a cloud.<sup>61</sup>

Hence, the loss of the innocence of childhood, for Chesterton, means more than a mere sinking into the sins and compromises of adult life: it means also a fatal loss of clarity of vision. Innocence is thus to be recovered by confronting evil, not only with a soul protected from corruption by purity of heart, but also, and above all, with a mind focused by clarity of discernment and imagination: it is the Chestertonian paradox at the root of the Father Brown stories, in which it is the truly innocent man who has both the greatest knowledge of evil, and the greatest power to overcome it. Chesterton understood Christ's injunction to become 'as a little child' as being not a commandment to withdraw from adult reality but, on the contrary, a charge to confront life's complexities in such a way as to transcend them: above all, for Chesterton, this confrontation involves the perception of life with that 'white light' of childhood 'on everything, cutting things out very clearly'. Marshall McLuhan's judgement here is to the point: 'For the Victorians, the nursery was the only tap-root connecting them with psychological reality. But for Chesterton the rhetoric and dimensions of childhood had also their true Christian vigour and scope.'<sup>62</sup> Chesterton's account of the death of St Thomas Aquinas suggests itself irresistibly; for here, in his vision, was a great Christian mind whose involvement in theological controversy had towards the end of his life induced in him a longing for 'the inner world . . . in which the saint is not cut off from simple men', and whose intellectual grasp of great realities had led him, at the last, to the clarity and innocence of the child: 'In the world of that mind there was . . . a just and intelligible order of all earthly things, a sane authority and a self-respecting liberty, and a hundred answers to a hundred questions in the complexity of ethics or economics. But there must

<sup>61</sup> *Autobiography*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Marshall McLuhan, introduction to Hugh Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton* (London, 1948), p. xx.

have been a moment, when men knew that the thunderous mill of thought had stopped suddenly; and that after the shock of stillness that wheel would shake the world no more . . . and the confessor, who had been with him in the inner chamber, ran forth as if in fear, and whispered that his confession had been that of a child of five.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Collected Works*, ii. 510–12.