

# *The Holiness Of G. K. Chesterton*

## Introduction

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Just after Chesterton's premature death at the age of sixtytwo, Maisie Ward, his first biographer, a friend of thirty years, was touched by a tribute paid to him by the maid at a house he used to visit in his home town of Beaconsfield. With tears in her eyes, she said simply 'Oh Miss, our Mr Chesterton dying – he was a sorter saint Miss, wasn't he – just to look at him when you handed him his hat made you feel sorter awesome.'<sup>1</sup>

It has not always been as evident, even to many of his admirers, that he was 'a sorter saint'; to others, though, like the late Cardinal Emmett Carter, who described him on the fiftieth anniversary of his death as one of those 'holy lay persons' who 'have exercised a truly prophetic role within the Church and the world', it has been clear enough. Cardinal Carter did not then (though later he changed his mind) believe that it would be possible to introduce a cause for his ultimate canonisation, since he did 'not think that we are sufficiently emancipated from certain concepts of sanctity'<sup>2</sup> to be able to contemplate such a thing. Cardinal Carter's homily, when published in the *Chesterton Review*, inspired the English historian J. J. Scarisbrick to wonder, despite the Cardinal's remarks, whether there were not, in fact, 'good grounds for considering Gilbert Keith Chesterton for canonisation'.

We all know that he was an enormously good man as well as an enormous one. My point is that he was more than that. There was a special integrity and blamelessness about him, a special devotion to the good and to justice ... Above all, there was that breathtaking, intuitive (almost angelic) possession of the Truth and awareness of the supernatural which only a truly holy person can enjoy. This was the gift of heroic intelligence and understanding – and of heroic prophecy. He was a giant, spiritually as well as physically. Has there ever been anyone quite like him in Catholic history?<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly time to ask why this should be, as undoubtedly it is, a growing view: after a paper I delivered in 2008 to the annual conference of the American Chesterton Society, I was asked what stage the cause towards Chesterton's beatification had reached in England. When I said there *was* no cause, the audience showed signs of incredulity. I explained lamely that there had to be evidence of a cult: one man stood up and said, indicating the approximately 500 hundred present, 'what the heck do they think *we* are?'

The English audience at the conference on 'The Holiness of G. K. Chesterton' held in Oxford the following year (the papers delivered at this conference form the core of the present volume) responded in a similar way. Certainly, there has been for many years a cult of Gilbert Chesterton in countries as distant from each other as Italy and Argentina. A few months after the Chesterton Society's 2009 conference, a prayer for his intercession emerged, which when posted on the Society's blog quickly inspired translations in both Italian and Spanish (texts in appendix B). Before we pursue the question of Chesterton's holiness, nevertheless, we need to ask again why such a notion should still be unthinkable to so many.

Perhaps it is necessary to share his own simplicity and purity of heart to begin to perceive it with the clarity of that housemaid. To the clever and sophisticated, commentators like A. N. Wilson, the very idea is absurd: he recently dismissed the ‘bizarre talk of GK’s canonisation’ with the impatience of all those who admire Chesterton as a wit and perhaps even as a perceptive (but lightweight) social critic, but who wish to close their minds firmly against any notion of his virtue, let alone his holiness. Chesterton, on this reading, cannot bear the weight of any very close scrutiny, either of his thought or of his personality: ‘with so playful a writer as Chesterton, one needs to tread carefully’, as Wilson puts it. With all this goes another assertion, common among those who like Chesterton well enough but are anxious to underplay the significance of his pilgrimage from agnosticism to theism to a kind of Unitarianism then on to Anglican Catholicism and finally to Rome; and especially of that final and definitive stage of his spiritual journey. The implication is sometimes made that after he became a Roman Catholic, his writing deteriorated; even that he became a mere polemical hack in the service of his Church. Thus, for the Anglican A. L. Maycock the decade beginning in 1904, ‘The decade of *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, of “The Ballad of the White Horse”, of ... the *Charles Dickens*, the first two volumes of Father Brown, of *The Victorian Age in Literature* and much else shows him at the summit of his powers.’<sup>4</sup>

The view, nevertheless, that Chesterton reached the summit only after his reception into the Catholic Church in 1922, with *The Everlasting Man*, *St Francis* and, above all perhaps, with *St Thomas Aquinas*, is probably more generally held. Etienne Gilson, one of the most substantial Thomist scholars of the last century, famously remarked on the appearance of *St Thomas Aquinas* that ‘Chesterton makes one despair. I have been studying St Thomas all my life and I could never have written such a book.’<sup>5</sup> Despite so massive an intellectual achievement as *St Thomas Aquinas*, nevertheless, the notion of Chesterton as a thinker continued to face exactly the same objection after his death as the more far-reaching perception that he was a saint. How could anyone so exuberantly funny be a thinker, let alone an exemplar of holiness?

Another kind of objection entirely has to be confronted: the recurrent accusation that, as Adam Gopnik put it in the *New Yorker* magazine, not only was Chesterton an anti-Semite, he had an ‘ugly’ and ‘obsessive’ hatred of Jews: he was, in short, ‘a *nasty* anti-Semite and medievalising reactionary’ who needs to be protected ‘from his admirers, who *pretend* that he was not’ [my italics]. I believe that this accusation is not only ignorant but preposterous, and that there is evidence (some of it new) not only that Chesterton throughout his life, whatever his scathing opinions on certain individual Jews, was generally positive in his views on Jews and Jewry, and outraged over anti-Jewish persecutions, whether Czarist, anti-Dreyfusard or Nazi. I have, therefore thought it necessary to deal with the accusation of anti-Semitism, and have done so in an Appendix.

Resistance to any notion of Chesterton’s holiness has taken many forms. Such resistance, even in the case of servants of God whose sanctity now seems almost unassailable, is hardly unprecedented, and not only in secularist quarters. It is worthwhile to remember, perhaps, that difficult though it now is to imagine, until comparatively recently the sanctity of John Henry Newman was very far from being universally acknowledged, not only by literary intellectuals, for whom such questions do not arise, or (very differently) by members of the Anglican Church, which had so frequently felt the polemical sting of this most brilliant and witty controversialist, but also by Roman Catholics. As late as the 1950s, many Catholics thought of Newman as a great theologian but not as a particularly holy man. For most of the seventy years following Newman’s death there was no cult, even at the Birmingham Oratory where his life as a Catholic had been lived out. Have we now, seventy-three years after Chesterton’s death, reached a kind of tipping point in his reputation, of the same kind that Newman’s reputation reached, leading to the opening of his cause in 1959, seventy-eight years after his death? It is no idle question: for, in the words of the Prefect of the Congregation for the

Causes of Saints, Cardinal Saraiva Martins, 'If for the faithful [there is] no reputation of holiness, the bishop cannot even initiate the cause.'<sup>6</sup> Is there, and if there is not should there be, such a reputation?

To begin at the beginning, how do we know a saint when we see one? John Henry Newman once expressed his dislike of hagiographies which in his words 'chop up a Saint into chapters of faith, hope and charity'. The danger, he thought, was the creation of a notion of sanctity which was somehow bland and conformist. He pointed out that the saints of the early church 'rather than writing formal doctrinal treatises ... write controversy'. Not only that, they 'mix up their own persons . . . with the didactic or polemical works which engaged them'.<sup>7</sup> Newman could almost have been writing about himself; he could also have been describing someone as yet unborn: Chesterton denied that he was a real novelist by saying that he 'could not be a novelist; because I really like to see ideas or notions wrestling naked ... and not dressed up in a masquerade as men and women. But I could be a journalist because I could not help being a controversialist';<sup>8</sup> and we might add that if anyone in the modern age ever, in Newman's words, mixed up his 'own [person] with the didactic or polemical works which engaged [him]?' more than Chesterton did, it is difficult to know who it might be. The saints of the early church were controversialists; but though Newman may have disliked their being 'chopped up into chapters of faith, hope and charity', they could hardly have been saints without these cardinal virtues: indeed, they became controversialists because of them. Chesterton was a controversialist because of his passion for the truth, because he had a real hatred of false thinking, of what he, following the Christian tradition, called 'heresy': his discovery of the Christian religion was achieved with an intellectual rigour which we can say is the hallmark of all his great writings, a category which includes much of his journalism. And though Chesterton never flaunted his personal faith in his writings, his passionate commitment to it could emerge at any time. At one of his frequent speaking engagements a Canon Barnett recalled that a member of the audience 'spoke discourteously of Christ':

Mr Chesterton [recalled Canon Barnett] bore him for the allotted time, and then slipping off his indifference like a loose coat, sprang to his feet and, with glorious eloquence and rapidity, told of his own faith, stripped the incidents of time and circumstance from the Character which has transfigured history, and declaimed that reverence and humility were the paths all men should keep open, for they alone led to the evolution of the true. I never now read anything by Mr. Chesterton without seeing him on that platform defending, in a physical elephantine rage, his spiritual angelic surety.<sup>9</sup>

And this 'spiritual angelic surety' was intellectually decisive: it governed absolutely his thinking about everything, whether he was unambiguously writing about religion or not. As he put it in December 1903, very early in his career as a writer,

You cannot evade the issue of God; whether you talk about pigs or the binomial theory, you are still talking about Him ... Things can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is false, but nothing can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is true. Zulus, gardening, butcher's shops, lunatic asylums, housemaids and the French Revolution – all these things not only may have something to do with the Christian God, but must have something to do with Him if He really lives and reigns.<sup>10</sup>

His perceptions of the real world and everything in it had already been transformed by his new

faith: as he had put it earlier that year, after conversion, ‘With this idea once inside our heads a million things become transparent as if a lamp were lit behind them.’<sup>11</sup>

So, we can say that his faith was the rocklike foundation of his thought. We can say, too, that his whole life exemplified the virtue of hope; indeed, it defined him as a writer in a century increasingly engulfed by hopelessness. And we can say that what he called pessimism – for him a key word – was one of the few things that could rouse him to real anger, to controversy which had about it a fierce and personal tinge. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in an attack he launched as early as 1901 on Schopenhauer, that great philosopher of absolute loss of all hope:

In the case of Schopenhauer, tinging all the heavens with his own tremendous mood, it is inevitable that we should speak personally. And of all men whose souls have influenced the world, Schopenhauer seems to me the most contemptible. ... In his most famous essay, ‘The Misery of Life’, he moans that ‘every satisfied wish begets a new one,’ which seems to me the definition of happiness ... Schopenhauer positively complains of the fact that the heart is ‘a bottomless abyss’, as if to find a bottom to it would not be the end of all human hope.<sup>12</sup>

And ‘human hope’ was for him not simply a personal possession, though it was that at the very least: it was a cause, passionately believed in and fought for. From the beginning, as a writer, as he wrote later in the *Autobiography*, he was ‘full of a new and fiery resolution to write against the Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of the age’.<sup>13</sup> But he had begun to react strongly against ‘the Pessimists’ long before he became a journalist: for, the fashionable pessimism and languor of the *fin de siècle* transgressed against what became – after he had emerged from what we can without exaggeration call the dark night of the soul through which he lived during his time at the Slade School of Art (autumn 1893 to summer 1894) – the most powerful motivating perception of his whole life: that is, his gratitude for all creation, and particularly for his own life. ‘Pessimism’ encapsulated what was for him the cardinal sin of ingratitude: in a notebook dating from the autumn of 1894 (he was just twenty) he penned a two-line pensée headed ‘A pessimist’, which read simply:

So you criticise the cosmos  
And borrow a skull and a tongue to do it with.<sup>14</sup>

When Chesterton collected a number of his pieces into a book, which he entitled , he made it clear that the attack on pessimism was for him a major theme of the collection. In his Introduction, he asserts that in the modern age,

Pessimism is now patently, as it always was essentially, more commonplace than piety . . . The pessimist is commonly spoken of as the man in revolt. He is not. Firstly, because it requires some cheerfulness to continue in revolt, and secondly, because pessimism appeals to the weaker side of everybody, and the pessimist, therefore, drives as roaring a trade as the publican. The person who is really in revolt is the optimist, who generally lives and dies in a desperate and suicidal effort to persuade all the other people how good they are.<sup>15</sup>

In defending what he called the ‘discredited’ virtue of humility, he took the opportunity ‘to remark that this discredit has arisen at the same time as a great collapse of joy in current literature and philosophy. Men have revived the splendour of Greek self-assertion at the same time that they have revived the bitterness of Greek pessimism’.<sup>16</sup> His optimism was not something into which he had to argue himself: for most of his life, once he had finally and definitively emerged from the profoundly depressive feelings of the Slade period,<sup>17</sup> it was something which entirely possessed

him. And once he had become a Christian, it informed and defined his faith. 'Christianity' he wrote in , 'satisfies suddenly and perfectly man's ancestral instinct for being the right way up; satisfies it supremely in this; that by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small.' And of course, because Chesterton is always a sign of contradiction, that means also that at the heart of any opposing world-view, ancient or modern, is despair.

To the pagan ... the small things are as sweet as the small brooks breaking out of the mountain; but the broad things are as bitter as the sea. When the pagan looks at the very core of the cosmos he is struck cold. Behind the gods, who are merely despotic, sit the fates, who are deadly . . . It is profoundly true that the ancient world was more modern than the Christian. The common bond is in the fact that ancients and moderns have both been miserable about existence, about everything, while mediaevals were happy about that at least. I freely grant that the pagans, like the moderns, were only miserable about everything – they were quite jolly about everything else. I concede that the Christians of the Middle Ages were only at peace about everything – they were at war about everything else.<sup>18</sup>

Chesterton's intellect, then, was entirely suffused by his faith; and his heart was filled by a hope that welled up from his unflinching gratitude for the gift of life. As for his charity, we can say that Schopenhauer was one of the very few exceptions that prove the rule: nowhere in general do we see it more clearly than in his love for his intellectual opponents, especially for Shaw: 'Nothing could have been more generous', wrote Shaw after his death, 'than his treatment of me'.<sup>19</sup> He was a controversialist because he hated heresy; but he had an extraordinary capacity for loving the heretic: he might even have come to love Schopenhauer if they had actually met, as he did frequently meet Shaw and Wells: he might even have cheered him up. In controversy, no matter how fierce, as Belloc wrote after his death, 'He seemed always to be in a mood not only of comprehension for his opponent but of admiration for some quality in him ... it was this in him which made him, with other qualities, so universally beloved.'<sup>20</sup> This was a quality that Chesterton shared with other holy men; it is, indeed, one of the reasons he understood them so well, a clear example of what is termed 'connaturality', the faculty by which one holy man has a special insight into the mind and heart of another; St Thomas Aquinas's huge productivity, he wrote, could not have been achieved 'if he had not been thinking even when he was not writing; but above all thinking combatively. This, in his case, certainly did not mean bitterly or spitefully or uncharitably; but it did mean combatively. As a matter of fact, it is generally the man who is not ready to argue, who is ready to sneer. That is why, in recent literature, there has been so little argument and so much sneering'.<sup>21</sup> Like St Thomas, Chesterton was both combative and charitable; like him, too, he was constantly 'thinking even when he was not writing': One of his friends once saw him

emerge from Shoe Lane, hurry into the middle of Fleet Street, and abruptly come to a standstill in the centre of the traffic. He stood there for some time, wrapped in thought, while buses, taxis and lorries eddied about him in a whirlpool and while drivers exercised to the full their gentle art of expostulation. Having come to the end of his meditations, he held up his hand ... and returned to Shoe lane.<sup>22</sup>

His legendary absent-mindedness, according to Ian Crowther, demonstrates that 'here was a true contemplative, given (as few people are) to the habit of prolonged and concentrated thought'.<sup>23</sup>

If he was a contemplative, was he also a mystic, as Maisie Ward believed (asserting that *The Everlasting Man* and *St. Francis* seemed to her 'the highest expression of Gilbert's mysticism')? She added that she had 'hesitated to use the word for it is not one to be used lightly, but I can find no other'.<sup>24</sup> There are at least two very clear views on the question of whether or not Chesterton was

a mystic, represented in this volume by Fr Nicholas Madden OCD and Fr Bob Wild. Was he a true mystic in the classical sense, in the same sense as St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Avila were? Fr Madden, writing from within the same tradition, argues (chapter four) that there is little support for such a view in his published writings:

The grasp, the insight, the originality, the delight, mark everything he expressed, his detective stories, his controversial writing, his biographies, his conversation with children, his brilliance as a debater, his poetry, his faith in search of understanding ... Chesterton was undoubtedly a man of capacious spirit, but realizations are not encounters and encounters with the divine seem to be at the core of Christian mysticism in its strictest sense.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, we cannot, as Father Madden says, 'equate Chesterton's contemplation with mental prayer'. But there was undoubtedly, as I hope to show, at least one documented 'encounter', and probably more. What it may be true to say, as Fr Bob Wild argues (chapter five), is that he was 'a new *kind* of mystic'; perhaps it was by being, as Marshall McLuhan (a deeply perceptive commentator on Chesterton) argued,<sup>26</sup> a 'practical mystic'; I shall return to McLuhan's view presently.

Whether he was a true 'mystic' or not, he was undoubtedly a thinker, though on his death, the *Manchester Guardian's* obituary made a point of dismissing the widespread use of the word 'philosopher' to describe Chesterton as 'very illchosen'. He had, asserted the writer, 'a profusion of fresh and original ideas, but they owed more to . . . an enormously zestful temperament than to continuous or connected thought'. His friend Belloc commented that 'The intellectual side of him has been masked for many and for some hidden by his delight in the exercise of words and especially in the comedy of words.' But there was nothing merely facetious about his delight in the comedy of life. Belloc called it the 'constant and exuberant geniality which all around him ... felt at once, and feelings were in a sense nourished' and explained it as a 'genius for good humour lifted to the plane on which it becomes a moving and efficient virtue'. 'The importance of humour', argues Fr Ker (pp. 38), 'is essential both for understanding Chesterton's concept of holiness and also for appreciating his own holiness'.

Chesterton's humour is surely part of a God-centredness in his personality which can only be fully appreciated by understanding something of its origins. There is a moment in the life story of many saints in which personal crisis is followed by a moment of vision, a moment in which there is a personal encounter with God which brings about a complete change of direction. There is, I suggest, such a moment in Chesterton's life. He was twenty years old. He had just left the Slade School of Art, where he had undergone a prolonged time of periodic depressions. After possibly the worst but certainly the last of these, he wrote to his friend Edmund Clerihew Bentley about what seemed to be – and in fact was – the final ending of this dark period in his life. We can date this letter in the summer of 1894: and in it he can only be talking about some kind of clearly and definitively religious experience: he describes it as a 'vision' and writes of 'speaking to God':

Inwardly speaking I have had a funny time. A meaningless fit of depression, taking the form of certain absurd psychological worries, came upon me, and instead of dismissing it and talking to people, I had it out and went very far into the abysses indeed. The result was that I found that things, when examined, necessarily spelt such a mystically satisfactory state of things, that without getting back to earth, I saw lots that made me certain it is all right. The vision is fading into common day now, and I am glad. It is embarrassing talking to God face to face, as a man speaketh to a friend [Chesterton is referring here to Exodus 33, in the Authorised Version, which he loved and knew well: 'and the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his

friend’].<sup>27</sup>

After this ‘vision’ (which does seem to be, in Fr Madden’s phrase, some kind of ‘encounter with the divine’) he never again fell into the depression and instability from which he had emerged. This is how he wrote about the consequences of this final emergence from ‘the abysses’ when he came to write his autobiography forty years later; it is a key passage:

I had wandered to a position not very far from the phrase of my Puritan grandfather, when he said that he would thank God for his creation [even] if he were a lost soul. I hung on to religion by one thin thread of thanks ... 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>28</sup>

The rest of his life, we can say, Chesterton spent digging for that ‘submerged sunrise of wonder’. The autobiography is not always a reliable source of information about Chesterton’s life. But at this point there is strong contemporary evidence for its reliability. A notebook he began keeping in the autumn of that year is full of a sense of wonder and of gratitude for his own existence. Here is one of the reflections I found in it, when I was researching my book *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*:

There is one secret for life  
The secret of constant astonishment.

On the same page he writes this:

There is one thing which gives radiance to everything, streets,  
houses, lamp posts, communities, politics, lives –  
It is the idea of something round the corner

At about the time he started this particular notebook, his friends Bentley and Oldershaw went up to Oxford and other friends went elsewhere; he undoubtedly missed them, and he wrote a poem called ‘The Idyll’, which expresses his feelings about their departure. It ends

Two of them are at Oxford and one in Scotland and two at other places.  
But I wish they would all walk in now, for the tea is made.

One biographer thinks that this poem is evidence for the theory that Chesterton was still prone to depressive feelings, even after the vision he wrote about to Bentley. But if one reads ‘The Idyll’, not in Maisie Ward’s biography but on the manuscript page, one finds this, immediately following it:

Who said angel’s tears?  
I say angels roaring with laughter  
For angels love and know say the Rabbis  
And laughter is the juncture of love & knowledge.

On the same page he wrote a series of *pensées* – brief unconnected thoughts – which show a new flourishing of his religious interests together with a newly rediscovered and now permanent

optimism, a gratitude for his own existence and that of his fellow men, and a rejection of his former depressive self; there is a clear sense, here and in other writings from this period, that a corner has been turned and that a new life is now beginning:

It matters less what a man's religion is  
As long as it keeps ahead of him  
Charity to one's stupid old selves  
It is the only hard charit  
Existence is the deepest fact we can think of  
And it is such a nice fact  
If I could sing the most poetical poem of my vision  
I would sing the poem of Charing Cross Station

In the same notebook occurs the following, written, it is worthwhile to reflect, about fourteen years before his theological development from Agnosticism to a form of Catholic Christianity comes to its natural conclusion with *Orthodoxy*:

Have you taken in the conception  
Of the tremendous Everything which is anywhere  
And dreamed that it could fail to satisfy anything in you?

It is clear that we are very close here to Chesterton's first astonished discovery of what that 'Everything' was, or at least, where it came from. A few pages before, he had written a brief poem called 'A walk'. It is just three lines long:

Have you ever known what it is to walk  
Along a road in such a frame of mind  
That you thought you might meet God at any turn of the path?

Turning these pages one has a strong sense that in them at times Chesterton is struggling for words, almost for breath; that his direct experience of the 'sunrise of wonder' he writes about in the was being recorded here for the first time; and that this first rediscovery of wonder and joy was simply beyond his powers of utterance to describe; at one point, he expresses his intense frustration:

I pause between two dark houses,  
For there is a song in my heart,  
If I could sing at this moment what I wish to sing,  
The nations would crown me,  
If I were dumb ever afterwards,  
For I am sure it would be the greatest song in the world . . .  
*But it will not come out.* [My emphasis]

We can almost say that the rest of his life was spent in a more and more articulate attempt to sing that song; and after his death, in the context of his massive complete *oeuvre* (over eighty books, hundreds of poems, and many thousands of articles) one critic wrote that 'The other articles of the Chestertonian creed fall easily into place once this ruling principle of "wonder in all things" . . . is firmly grasped.'

We can say, perhaps, that it is in his sense of wonder at the material world and at the gift of creation

itself, in his sense of ‘radiance’ in ‘everything, streets, houses, lamp posts, communities, politics, lives’ that we can understand how Chesterton can justifiably be called ‘a new kind of mystic’. It is in the way in which he can perceive and then transfigure the stuff of everyday living, for us too, by the light of his own ‘sunrise of wonder’, that his ‘practical mysticism’ can best be understood. As Marshall McLuhan explains it,

There are two principal sides to everything, a practical side and a mystical . . . It is necessary to define the sense in which Mr Chesterton is a mystic, before the relation of this to the practical side can be judged. He once wrote: ‘Real mystics don’t hide mysteries, they reveal them. They set a thing up in broad daylight and when you’ve seen it, it is still a mystery. But the mystagogues hide a thing in secrecy; and when you find it, it’s a platitude.’ The mysteries revealed by Mr Chesterton are the daily miracles of sense and consciousness . . . Mr. Chesterton has stepped beyond the frontiers of poetry to what M. Maritain in speaking of Rimbaud calls ‘the Eucharistic passion which he finds in the heart of life’.<sup>29</sup>

Chesterton’s sense of wonder, we need to insist, derives from an absolute centredness in God, who is its always bubbling source: we can see his own perception of this reaching its natural intellectual conclusion by the end of 1903 (he was twenty-nine), in the article in *The Daily News* (already quoted) in which he explains his discovery

that the world, clearly examined, does point with an extreme suggestiveness, to the existence of a spiritual world, of a world of agencies, not apparently produced by matter, capable to some extent of controlling and inspiring, capable to some extent of being known . . . The return to the spiritual view of life depends on no particular argument. It rests, like the movement towards evolution, on the fact that the thing works out. We put on the theory, like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass.<sup>30</sup>

And this new perspective induces in him an irrepressible lightness of spirit. This was in some ways something of a problem for him. As he put it in one of his early apologetic articles,

I have begun to realise that there are a good many people to whom my way of speaking about these things appears like an indication that I am flippant or imperfectly sincere . . . I think I see the naturalness of the mistake, and how it arose in people so far removed from the Christian atmosphere. Christianity is itself so jolly a thing that it fills the possessor of it with a certain silly exuberance . . .<sup>31</sup>

This conviction that joy is at the centre of the Christian faith is something that many have experienced at certain times: but few have held it at the centre of their lives so entirely and so exultantly until death, as Chesterton did. Towards the end of his life, he looked back on it as having been ‘indefensibly happy’. We have to ask why: and the only answer I can arrive at is the same answer we have to give when we ask similar questions about the saints: that they were all, each in his or her own way, very close to God and that only that closeness can explain their lives and the irrepressible joy at the centre of them.

His friend Lucian Oldershaw told Maisie Ward that even at school, ‘we felt that he was looking for God’. A friend who knew him well in the years that led up to *Orthodoxy*, Rann Kennedy, gave her what she called ‘electrifying’ testimony:

Gilbert was busy always with the other world . . . We must explain him like the hermits. So

obviously, burningly led by the Holy Ghost that he had no time to think of his own soul's salvation ... Gilbert had innocence, simplicity, down-in-the dirt humility he had an [exceeding] calm of soul. He enjoyed a perpetual Eucharist, the Eucharist of desire ... Gilbert [was] always busy with the other world, was ministered to by angels like Our Lord.<sup>32</sup>

After his death, his lifelong friend, E. C. Bentley (inventor of the clerihew), wrote of his 'exuberantly joyous and love-compelling personality'. Belloc's judgement that he was 'universally beloved' is no mere obituary cliché. At his funeral, the streets of Beaconsfield were lined with mourners: it is moving to reflect that it was the police who asked if the funeral cortege could take a longer route from the church to the cemetery, so that more people might have a chance to say goodbye. His friend William Titterton followed the coffin on foot:

It is a roundabout way we go. For the police of the place will have it that Gilbert Chesterton shall make his last earthly journey past the homes of the people who knew him and loved him best. And there they were, crowding the pavements, and all, like us, bereaved. Yet it was almost a gala day. There was no moping, no gush of tears. Nay, there was laughter as one of us recalled him and his heroic jollity to another's ready remembrance. A policeman at the gate of the cemetery said to Edward Macdonald, 'Most of the lads are on duty, else they would all have been here.'<sup>33</sup>

There were of course many epitaphs. Pius XI sent a telegram describing him as a 'gifted defender of the Catholic Faith' (which sounds almost like a kind of informal declaration that he was a Doctor of the Church). 'Blessed are they that saw him and were honoured by his friendship', pronounced Monsignor Ronald Knox at the memorial Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral, two weeks after his death: 'They found in him a living example of charity, of chivalry, of unbelievable humility which will remain with them, perhaps as a more effective document of Catholic verity than any word even he wrote.'<sup>34</sup>

But for most of those who loved him his true epitaph was the lovely verse written years before by the poet laureate, Walter de la Mare, which by the wish of his widow Frances appeared on the service sheet at his funeral Requiem Mass in Beaconsfield. Like Monsignor Knox's panegyric it recalls his chivalry; above all it depicts him as a warrior, but a warrior animated only by his love of God and of the human race:

Knight of the Holy Ghost, he goes his way,  
Wisdom his motley, Truth his loving jest;  
The mills of Satan keep his lance in play,  
Pity and innocence his heart at rest.<sup>35</sup>

- 1 Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, London and New York, Sheed & Ward, 1952, p. 261.
- 2 Homily for the Mass of the Anniversary of the Death of G. K. Chesterton, *The Chesterton Review*, vol.xii, n.4, November 1986, 439.
- 3 *The Chesterton Review*, vol.xii, no.4, November 1986, 584.
- 4 A. L. Maycock, *The Man who was Orthodox*, London, D. D. Dobson, 1963, p. 11.
- 5 Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1944, p. 525.
- 6 <http://www.zenit.org/article-15716?l=english>
- 7 Newman, *Historical Sketches*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1897, p. 84.
- 8 *Autobiography*, London, Fisher Press, 1992, p. 298.
- 9 Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, p. 75.
- 10 'A Universal Relevance', *The Daily News*, 12 December 1903.
- 11 'The Return of the Angels', *The Daily News*, 14 March 1903.
- 12 'The Great Pessimist', *The Daily News*, 7 June 1906.
- 13 *Autobiography*, p. 92.
- 14 BL MS Add. 73334 f5.
- 15 G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*, London, J. M. Dent, 1901, pp. 2–4.
- 16 Chesterton, 'In defence of humility,' *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 17 It has become normal to define this period of depressive feelings by referring to his revulsion against what he understood of the theory of impressionism as it was understood at the Slade School of Art: but in fact he was only at the Slade for one year, and the depressions went on for at least two years and probably longer, though they certainly ended at about the time he made his decision to discontinue his studies there. See my *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, pp. 89ff.
- 18 *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, I, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 14.
- 19 Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1997, p. 373.
- 20 Hilaire Belloc in *The Observer*, 21 June 1936.
- 21 G. K. Chesterton, *Collected Works*, II, p. 499.
- 22 Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, pp. 72–3.
- 23 Ian Crowther, *Chesterton*, London, Claridge, 1991, p. 11.
- 24 Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1944, pp. 410–11.
- 25 See below, [p. 73]
- 26 Marshall McLuhan, 'G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic', *Dalhousie Review*, 15 (4), 1936, 455–6.
- 27 Ffinch, 41. BL MS Add. 73191.
- 28 *Autobiography*, pp. 91–2.
- 29 Marshall McLuhan, 'G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic', *Dalhousie Review*, 455–6.
- 30 G. K. Chesterton, 'The return of the angels', *The Daily News*, 14 March 1903.
- 31 'Christianity and Rationalism', *The Clarion*, 22 July 1904; *Works*, I, p. 374.
- 32 Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, p. 237.
- 33 Michael Coren, *Gilbert: The Man Who Was Chesterton*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1989, pp. 4–5.
- 34 Philip Caraman SJ (ed.), *Occasional Sermons of Ronald Knox*, London, Burns & Oates, 1960, p. 405.
- 35 Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 552.