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### Priests, Poets, Criminals, Lunatics: The Detective Fiction in Chesterton's Works

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## Introduction

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (b.1874) was probably one of the most prolific writers in the history of English literature. A fat and gigantic man, a plump face, two twinkling eyes peering out from behind a pair of round glasses, severe to all appearances, but actually affably ironic, good-hearted as St Francis, intuitive and cunning as Father Brown. He wrote novels, short stories, poems, travel books, pieces of journalism and other non-fictional works, at his best in all genres. In short, he produced an enormous body of work difficult to master.

Given Chesterton's extensive work it might be useful to enter in "medias res" by quoting the enlightening words of J.L. Borges, Chesterton's enthusiastic admirer:

Nella sua scrittura restano marcate tracce pittoriche. I suoi personaggi usano entrare in scena come attori e i suoi paesaggi vivacemente sbazzati s'appiccicano alla memoria. GKC visse nel corso degli anni intrisi di malinconia a cui si riferisce con la definizione *fin de siècle*. Da questo ineliminabile tedio venne salvato da Whitman e da Stevenson. Eppure qualcosa gli rimase attaccato addosso, rintracciabile nel suo gusto per l'orrido. Il più celebre dei suoi romanzi "L'uomo che fu Giovedì", ha come sottotitolo 'Un incubo'. Avrebbe potuto essere Poe o magari un Kafka; lui comunque preferì – e gli siamo grati della scelta – essere Chesterton e coraggiosamente optò per la felicità o forse di averla trovata. Dalla fede anglicana passò a quella cattolica, che, secondo lui, è basata sul buon senso. Arguì che la stranezza di tale fede si attaglia alla stranezza dell'universo, come la strana forma di una chiave si adatta perfettamente alla strana forma di una serratura. In Inghilterra il cattolicesimo di Chesterton ne ha pregiudicato la fama, poiché la gente persiste nel ridurlo ad un mero propagandista cattolico. Innegabilmente lo fu, ma fu anche un uomo di genio, un gran prosatore e un grande poeta. La letteratura è una delle forme della felicità; forse nessun scrittore mi ha dato tante ore felici come Chesterton.<sup>1</sup>

In a few words Borges is able to suggest the historical background of the time in which GKC grew up, a period tinged with melancholy and tediousness. In fact, in Chesterton's opinion, the last decade of Romanticism was degenerating towards forms of extremely dark individualism, with manifestations of materialism and anarchism. In a scenario in which intellectuals are in

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Borges, *Introduzione*, in G. K. Chesterton *L'occhio di Apollo*, Milano, Franco Maria Ricci, 1979, pp. 7-11, p. 8-10.

constant conflict with the bourgeois world, in a society whose fundamental values are profit, moralism, faith in progress, productivity, shrewd rationality, pragmatism and where even a work of art is transformed into a simple payable good, the artist who tends towards the ideal, appears as a quaint person, unfit for common life, who, like Baudelaire's albatross is unable to fly. According to Carlo Pagetti and Oriana Palusci, among Chesterton's contemporaries the Victorian Age might have been introduced in the same way as fairy tales are: "Once upon a time there was a powerful and dreadful queen, whose kingdom stretched across most of the globe. Her name was Victoria."<sup>2</sup>

In 1913 GKC wrote a book *The Victorian Age in Literature* in which he took 'the more delicate and entangled task' and 'dealt with the great Victorians'<sup>3</sup>, in a very untypical way: 'as one cuts a currant cake or a Gruyère cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come'<sup>4</sup>, that is to say 'not only by dates and names, but rather by schools and streams of thoughts'<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the book appears as Chesterton's personal view of the subject. The literature of 19th century England was revolutionary. The great Victorian writers did not hide themselves behind a conformist attitude, they knew that something important had been lost, and tried to retrieve it, even if most of them had an incomplete understanding of what it was. Henry James sought the supernatural, but found it only in its tragic and diabolic forms. Thomas Hardy 'was a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot'<sup>6</sup>. The spirit of Wilde's work was 'the idea of human misfortune coming most cruelly upon the optimism of innocence'. In short, Chesterton underlined how 'the decadents utterly lost the light and reason of their existence'<sup>7</sup> and plunged

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<sup>2</sup> C. Pagetti e O. Palusci, *L'età vittoriana*, in Paolo Bertinetti, *Storia della Letteratura inglese*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction*, in *The Victorian Age in Literature* [1913], London, University Press, 1947, pp. 8-11, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* cit., p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 137.

into a dark atmosphere of doubt. He argues that religion ‘was the key of this age as of every other’<sup>8</sup>, and in the coming Culture of Despair of the decadents, nothing could keep ‘the growing crowds of agnostics back from the most hopeless and inhuman extremes of destructive thought.’<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Chesterton greatly admired the great Victorian writers as ‘[he] also was born a Victorian, and sympathize not a little with the serious Victorian spirit’<sup>10</sup>, but, having such a pure gaze on that time, his task was precisely that of getting rid of the hopeless and inhuman aspect of the negative thought to which the Victorians were pushed by their loss of religious faith. To perform this task he puts a new kind of protagonist onto the scene: the “man alive”, who under various forms will inhabit all of his works. Chesterton’s works appear therefore as an anti-late Victorian reaction. In the midst of the crisis of the individual which characterized decadent culture, a sort of malady which corroded the self and pushed it to reject the external world by shutting oneself jealously away from it, by fleeing away towards mystery and arcane worlds, or abandoning oneself to nihilist impulses of self-destruction, Chesterton’s response is totally new. He had a weapon that helped him, a weapon that he struggled to obtain, his faith. As he ironically wrote in the opening of one of his marvellous works, his autobiography, after having been “ [...] baptized according to the formularies of the Church of England [...] it needed the whole water-power of West London to turn [him] into a Christian.”<sup>11</sup>

Chesterton, as Borges points out, reacts to this cultural situation thanks to Whitman and Stevenson, or in other words thanks to poetry and the love of adventure. In his whole work he proved that he had the poet's wonderstruck gaze, able to contemplate the universe driven by a passion for what is uncanny and enigmatic. Borges had underlined how for Chesterton the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction*, in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* [1936], San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2009, p. 21.

universe is strange and the man is, to some extent, plunged into a world full of signs and symbols. Chesterton wrote:

If I am asked, as a purely intellectual question, why I believe in Christianity, I can only answer, "For the same reason that an intelligent agnostic disbelieves in Christianity." I believe in it quite rationally upon the evidence. But the evidence in my case, as in that of the intelligent agnostic, is not really in this or that alleged demonstration; it is in an enormous accumulation of small but unanimous facts. The secularist is not to be blamed because his objections to Christianity are miscellaneous and even scrappy; it is precisely such scrappy evidence that does convince the mind. I mean that a man may well be less convinced of a philosophy from four books, than from one book, one battle, one landscape, and one old friend. The very fact that the things are of different kinds increases the importance of the fact that they all point to one conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

Through this chaotic theory of knowledge, Chesterton does not proceed with logic and mathematic deductions but with 'accumulation' of experiences which rationally appear as truths. The world is full of proofs, signs which point to the same direction and the only explanation is the existence of a point which is not easy to see where all of our indications converge, the existence of which is the only reasonable explication of all of our experiences. In other words, reality implies the existence of a mystery<sup>13</sup>. All this explains why for GKC the feeling of being plunged into a strange universe, full of signs and symbols, was a source of joy, as if God had invited him to a game of free, bizarre and rigorous deciphering.

The whole intellectual adventure of the writer is, to some extent, under the sign of this hermeneutic quest, running sometimes towards the 'grassland' of literature and other times veering towards the 'slope' of philosophy, however keeping faith with the principle that this quest is a source of happiness. Much happiness indeed, as Borges pointed out, Chesterton gives to his readers.

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<sup>12</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [1908], Chicago, Moody Classics, 2009, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. U. Casotto, *G. K. Chesterton L'enigma e la chiave*, Lindau, Torino, 2011, p.18.

Chesterton is primarily known for his most celebrated character Father Brown, a detective-priest, who appears in *The Father Brown Stories*. Chesterton's fame as a writer is closely tied indeed to his creation of detective stories, in which a variety of non-typical detectives, fond of truth, try to solve the most intricate enigmas. This is what also happens in all his novels, however, even if they do not entirely belong to the genre of the detective stories. The riddle and the mystery suddenly burst into the scene and from that moment onwards the plot starts to bend towards the thriller-esque.

The first two chapters of this dissertation will concentrate on the character of Father Brown through the analysis of some of the most significant stories. The first will focus on Father Brown: his appearance, his personality, his character in contrast with the most famous detectives in the history of literature, while the second chapter will discuss the types of criminals Father Brown comes face to face with.

After a brief introduction on Chesterton's peculiar characters of the poet and of the lunatic, which also recur in many novels, Chesterton's *The Poet and the Lunatics* will be the focus of the analysis of the third chapter. There the poet's wonderstruck gaze, which Chesterton learnt from Whitman, will be discussed as a further important key that could unlock the doors of mystery.

Finally, the fourth chapter will be devoted to *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*, a collection of stories each of which opens with a paradox. The paradox is a rhetorical artifice, which Chesterton used in all his works, but like Father Brown's faith and Gabriel Gale's poetry, it gives clarity to the darker sides of life. Even though these stories are not precisely detective stories, through the analysis of the most emblematic ones, the character of Mr. Pond, as a researcher after truth, will be discussed in the light of the previous considerations.

But, before entering into the analysis itself, it is important to point out that, if on the one hand Chesterton's faith, as Borges emphasized, compromised his fame particularly in England, on the other hand it leads the greatest part of his readers everywhere to consider him as a Christian apologist. One of the purposes of this dissertation will be that of demolishing this stereotype by showing Chesterton's greatness as an artist, which has already been widely pointed out by Borges, but also by Calvino, Hemingway and Kafka.



## **1. Detective fiction as a way to understand life and its darker sides**

Chesterton's world is a place crammed with signs and symbols, a dark world difficult to understand in which man struggles to achieve the truth. Chesterton's taste for detective fiction was therefore a natural choice, a genre which let him easily demonstrate the arduous pursuit of truth, the difficult decoding of the enigmas of life.

According to Chesterton, the first principle of detective fiction is not darkness but light, the story, in his opinion, is written for the moment in which the reader understands at last, not for the previous numerous moments in which he does not understand:

L'obiettivo autentico di un giallo intelligente non è frastornare il lettore, bensì illuminarlo; ma illuminarlo in maniera tale che ogni porzione successiva di verità giunga come una sorpresa. In questa forma di mistero come in quelle più nobili, l'obiettivo del vero mistico non è tanto di mistificare, quanto di illuminare. Lo scopo è la luce e non l'oscurità; la luce in forma di lampo.<sup>14</sup>

In these lines, Chesterton attacks the writers of detective stories who built their narrations on complicated plots with the aim of knocking out the reader. For him, the purpose of a detective story is to bring light, but he stresses the accent on the darkness as he says: "è chi è stato al buio a vedere una grande luce, dopo".<sup>15</sup> According to Chesterton, it seems that only the person who has been 'in the darkness' is able to see a 'great light'.

Moreover, the secret must be simple, so that, when revealed, it need no further explanation:

Il secondo grande principio è che l'anima della fiction gialla non è la complessità bensì la semplicità. Il segreto può apparire complesso, ma dev'essere semplice; e anche in ciò è un simbolo dei misteri più alti. Lo scrittore c'è per spiegare il mistero; non deve però trovarsi nella necessità di spiegare la spiegazione.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Errori a proposito dei gialli*, in *Come si scrive un giallo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2002, pp. 35-39, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Come si scrive un giallo*, in *Come si scrive un giallo* cit., p. 30.

It echoes the passage from the Bible: *Isaiah 9,1* "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light".

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*.

For Chesterton, it is the simplicity of the mystery, which is the same simplicity of the common things around us, that enlightens the reader. Chesterton, as many other detective writers, pushes the reader to question himself, in a sort of hermeneutic quest, but in this quest he leads people to understand the wonder and the beauty of being alive, re-teaching them the gift of wonder with which children gaze at the universe:

Quelle che chiamiamo cose insignificanti sono in realtà minuscole appendici di racconti innumerevoli; un'esistenza comune e incolore è pressappoco la mescolanza disordinata di diecimila romanzi gialli.<sup>17</sup>

For Chesterton this mixture of which life is made was the highest of pleasures and that is why he finds the way to include some detective elements even in his book on St Thomas. In Chesterton's eyes, even monotheism, that is to say the idea that the whole world is the manifestation of the one God, is an idea worthy of a detective story.<sup>18</sup> According to Chesterton existence itself is a miracle, or rather an enigma, and such a wonderfully intriguing enigma he could not help investigating. He would have also liked to have written his autobiography in the form of short stories, à la Sherlock Holmes, with the difference, he argues, typical of Chesterton's light-hearted attitude, "that his were astonishing examples of observation, and mine astonishing examples of lack of observation."<sup>19</sup>

As Chesterton said "[his] name achieved a certain notoriety as that of a writer of those murderous short stories, commonly called detective stories."<sup>20</sup> He began writing detective fiction in 1905 with a collection of short stories titled *The Club of Queer Trades*. Before the appearances of the first collection of Father Brown stories in 1911, Chesterton also published a detective novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, in 1908. There followed, in addition to the Father Brown

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<sup>17</sup> G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Sebastiano Vecchio, *Introduzione a Come si scrive un giallo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. S. Vecchio, *Introduzione*, in *Come si scrive un giallo* cit., p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 317.

stories, one more detective novel and several additional detective short-story collections.

In Chesterton, the form of the detective fiction is attained through the creation of some specific characters who, facing the mysteries which surrounded them, find a solution sometimes even without searching, thanks to peculiar personal characteristics, but mostly by means of a gaze able to go beyond factual information and able to penetrate into the *Mystery*. It is emblematic, and it will be a point of discussion in the development of this dissertation, that Chesterton's detectives are all amateur detectives, never professionals, who arrive at the solution of the enigma almost by chance. It seems that in so doing, Chesterton wants to underline the fact that, for him, to be a detective is an innate characteristic of the human being (and not the prerogative of specialists), and that the pursuit of a solution is a natural human instinct.

The Father Brown stories, however, first brought Chesterton immense popularity. It is precisely in the character of Father Brown, in fact, that Chesterton's most interesting thoughts converge. He found the inspiration for Father Brown in 1904, when he first met Father John O'Connor, the Roman Catholic parish priest of St. Cuthbert's, Bradford, in England:

It has been generally said that Father Brown had an original in real life; and in one particular and rather personal sense, it is true.<sup>21</sup>

Writer and priest became friends; it was Father O'Connor who received Chesterton into the Roman Catholic Church on July 30, 1922, and who celebrated the Requiem Mass for him on July 27, 1936. Chesterton was also impressed with O'Connor's knowledge of the weakness of the human nature. O'Connor had a deep insight into the nature of evil, obtained through the many hours he had spent in the confessional. Thus, Chesterton became interested in creating a fictional priest-sleuth, one who outwardly appeared innocent, even naïve, but whose profound understanding of the psychology of evil would give him a great knowledge of criminals.

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<sup>21</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 318.

If on the one hand Chesterton himself admits that the fictional character of Father Brown was taken from Father O'Connor, in the *Autobiography* he also argues that:

The notion that a character in a novel must be “meant” for somebody or “taken from” somebody is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of narrative fancy, and especially of such slight fancies as mine.[...] The notion that a novelist takes a character bodily and in all its details from a friend or an enemy is a blunder that has done a great deal of harm.<sup>22</sup>

Father Brown is therefore a character who is worthy of a deep analysis in order to better understand his particular originality, which lies in the ever-present contrast between his appearance of worldly innocence and his acute insight into the intense activity of men's hearts and minds.

### **1.1 Cleverness and Dullness**

The first short story of The Father Brown saga, entitled *The Blue Cross*, tells about the way in which Father Brown succeeds in unmasking a thief disguised as a priest. Yet, the little priest is not the protagonist of the story. The narration opens, in fact, with the description of Aristide Valentin, a detective, arrived in England precisely to “make the greatest arrest of the century”<sup>23</sup>: to catch Flambeau ‘the great criminal’ wanted across half Europe. Valentin, ‘unfathomably French’, is the emblem of French rationalism. He, being a “thinking man”<sup>24</sup> conducts the investigation relying on factual information. He notices for example that Flambeau has a characteristic that he could not hide: his singular height. He knows that if his “quick eye had caught a tall apple-woman, a tall grenadier, or even a tolerably tall duchess, he might have arrested them on the spot”.<sup>25</sup> Presented as “the most famous investigator of the world”<sup>26</sup> and “one

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<sup>22</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 318.

<sup>23</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* [1910], in Chesterton *The Father Brown Stories*, London, Cassel, pp. 9-23, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 10.

of the most powerful intellects in Europe”<sup>27</sup>, he is precisely that kind of man who is never wrong and even facing the most complicated situation uses his brain to achieve the right solution. But the rational Valentin, despite his academic knowledge, during the course of the story is unable to find factual information and lacks precisely in what would be his best quality. Obligated, to some extent, to follow the train of what appears as unreasonable and inexplicable, he finds Flambeau, the criminal, but he does not understand how he managed. In fact, it will be Father Brown who will disseminate London of queer proofs in order to catch Valentin’s attention and lead him to the thief’s arrest. The rational detective, when about to catch the criminal and solve the case, suddenly realizes his failure: he, the most famous investigator of the world, he who seldom failed, “had grasped the criminal”<sup>28</sup>, but he does not know how he succeeded.

The detective’s description is immediately followed by that of the criminal. Flambeau’s qualities and the *coups* he has carried out are recounted. He was a Gascon, of gigantic stature and physically brave. The characteristic of his height is a detail of which Chesterton is fond and which recurs in many other works, inspired by both Chesterton personal stature and his love of the gigantesque. Flambeau’s crimes were chiefly those of ingenious and wholesale robbery, but the essential element was a sweeping simplicity. A brilliant acrobat, agile as a monkey, he was also skilful in disguise.

This seems the perfect start for a detective story according to the rules of the genre, but after the presentation of the detective-protagonist and that of the criminal-antagonist, there follows the description of a third character, a ‘little priest’ with a dull and round face and empty eyes, armed with “a large and shabby umbrella”<sup>29</sup>. The irruption of the small priest onto the scene unsettles the story. In the economy of the characters Father Brown is, to some extent, an unwanted third

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26 *Ibidem.*, p. 9.

27 *Ivi.*

28 G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* cit., p. 19.

29 *Ibidem.*, p. 10.

person. He always moves in an absent-minded way, modest, astonished, asks outwardly useless and innocent questions but acts most of the time in a surprising way. Priest by profession and accidentally detective, he is nevertheless the person who drives the action in a very subtle way. His investigative method, certainly eccentric, is startlingly effective: it is based on his knowledge of the evil which can be hidden in human's soul. Certainly, Father Brown, being a good Catholic priest, dedicates with care a large amount of his time to the activity of confession, as a spiritual guide and shepherd of his community. Listening to his 'flock' enables him to enter into close contact with the limits and the weaknesses of people touched by sins. Internal evidences of that appears in the story of the *Blue Cross*. Father Brown, addressing Flambeau, exclaims:

Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?<sup>30</sup>

With these words the small priest underlines that it is thanks to his knowledge of the evils that gnaw at the world and his attentive understanding of the human soul that he succeeds in unmasking Flambeau. This ability, accompanied by a seeming innocence characterized by apparently inattentive manners, is Father Brown's best weapon. Breaking down the potential criminal's defenses, the priest is able to obtain confessions, repentances and sometimes even conversions. That is what will happen to the king of the French thieves, Flambeau, who will become the priest's close friend, accompanying him in many of his investigative adventures. His moral conversion will take place in the marvelous short story titled *The Flying Stars*, where Father Brown succeeds in dissuading Flambeau from committing "the most beautiful crime [he] ever committed".<sup>31</sup>

It appears evident therefore, that there is a major difference between Valentin's investigative methods and that of the small priest. The difference consists of the opposition between the

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<sup>30</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* cit., p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Flying Stars* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 54-64, p. 54.

scientific rationalism of the French detective and the reasonableness and common sense of the little English priest. Valentin states that “the criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic”<sup>32</sup>, while Father Brown thinks it is essential to use the same methods as the criminals, thanks also to the knowledge of men which comes from the sacrament of confession.

It is also emblematic that, when one fails to achieve the truth, the other succeeds: Valentin’s arrogance prevents him from going beyond simple proofs, while Father Brown’s humility lets him enter into the criminal’s soul. It had been actually Father Brown who had led Valentin to the truth. But how does the little priest get to the solution? In the very last scene, when Father Brown and Flambeau, disguised as a priest, are seated, deep in discussion, the fake priest, in order to render more plausible his disguise, starts talking in defence of sentiment and against reason, and states:

Ah, yes, these modern infidels appeal to their reason; but who can look at those millions of worlds and not feel that there may well be wonderful universes above us where reason is utterly unreasonable?<sup>33</sup>

But the real priest replies:

No, reason is always reasonable [...] I know that people charge the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way.<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely thanks to his attack against reason that Father Brown has the damning proof that Flambeau is not a priest. He attacked reason, but attacking reason, as the little priest said, is bad theology.

There is a method therefore in the surprising solutions of the most intricate cases in which Father Brown is involved, and it is his cleverness, which is based on the humility of which his tiny physical aspect is the evidence.

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<sup>32</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* cit., p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* cit., p.20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi.*

## **1.2 Good and Evil**

The extraordinary success of the first short story pushed Chesterton to create other numerous detective stories focused on the sleuth-priest. Chesterton places therefore Father Brown in gothic, bizarre, cruel and sad stories; and the priest, like a pilgrim in search of truth, adapts himself wonderfully and gets inside the detective's shoes.

In the short story *The Secret Garden*, Chesterton, deals with one of the classical motifs of the detective story: that of an impossible murder occurring in an enclosed space. The murder, in fact, happens in a large and elaborate garden, with the peculiarity of having 'no exit [...] into the world outside'<sup>35</sup>. The main protagonist is again the scientific rationalist Aristide Valentin, who turns out to be also a proud and fervent atheist. But it is precisely his obstinate, almost fanatic, atheism which leads him to cross all limits and to commit a murder, revealing his darker and more fragile side.

The location is no longer London, but Paris. The French detective has organized a party in his house and has invited some of his friends, among which Father Brown. At a certain point, the body of an unknown man is found in the garden, with a beheaded head.

There, the perfect opening scene where once again the rival investigative methods of Valentin and of Father Brown face one another:

Meanwhile the good priest and the good atheist stood at the head and foot of the dead man motionless in the moonlight, like symbolic statues of their philosophies of death.<sup>36</sup>

Valentin, given his profession, assumes control of the situation and gives instructions, while Father Brown remains silent for most of the story. The guests are asked to enter the house and not

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35 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret Garden* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 23-39, p. 24.

36 *Ibidem.*, p. 29.



to leave it until the day after at noon, but two of them are missing: the American multimillionaire Mr. Brayne and the Commandant Mr. O'Brien, who is the first to be suspected since he was in possession of a sabre. When the Commandant appears in the room, he is interrogated aggressively by Valentin, but he soon proves he has a strong alibi. The Commandant is subsequently completely cleared of suspicion when the guests realize at last that Mr. Brayne has left the house, perhaps running away after the murder.

At this point, although the riddle of the death remains, the atmosphere is more relaxed as Brayne, almost certainly the criminal, is far away from the house. But the following morning, Father Brown's innocent voice interrupts that restored peace: he informs the guests that there has been another murder of the same sort committed, actually another beheading. The real murderer Valentin tries to convince his guests that this is another of "Brayne's experiments in butchery"<sup>37</sup> and he elucidates seemingly logical proofs:

killed in the same way as the other. Found within a few yards of the other. And sliced by the same weapon which we know he carried away.<sup>38</sup>

But the watchful eye of Father Brown has noticed a hidden detail and, with a scarcely veiled irony, replies:

I doubt whether Brayne could have cut off this head. [...] Can a man cut off his own head? I don't know.<sup>39</sup>

The little priest, after a careful look, in silence, at this second head has seen that it belongs to Brayne himself, the detail of a scar in the left ear being proof of it.

The words and the logic reasoning of Valentin did not undermine Father Brown's free mind, who in fact, starts to glimpse the solution of the case, but only partially.

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37 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret Garden* cit., p. 34.

38 *Ibidem.*, p. 34.

39 *Ivi.*

After having been silent for a considerable amount of time, the small English priest suddenly jumps to his feet, “holding his temples tight like a man in sudden and violent pain”<sup>40</sup> and cries:

Stop, stop, stop. [...] Stop talking a minute, for I see half. Will God give me strength? Will my brain make the one jump and see all? Heaven help me! I used to be fairly good at thinking. I could paraphrase any page in Aquinas once. Will my head split – or will it see? I see half – I only see half.<sup>41</sup>

Then, it is as if the sleuth-priest experienced an ‘epiphany’, a divine manifestation which leads him to see all; having, seemingly, enlarged his mind he can now see the whole truth perfectly. Therefore another facet of Father Brown’s character is here presented: sheer reason sometimes is not enough to explain things. On the contrary, in Valentin’s case it is precisely the high consideration of the power of reason that leads him to kill the American millionaire, and then himself.

Interestingly, in the *The Blue Cross* there was already a detail which foreshadowed Valentin’s dark side. In that story, Valentin says that “the criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic”<sup>42</sup>. In these words, Valentin betrays a certain fascination with crime. Investigating about crimes, he seems to have fallen victim to the charm of crime.

Father Brown unravels the enigma, which the devilish head of Valentin had plotted:

The murderer, hacked off his enemy’s head and flung the sword far over the wall. But he was too clever to fling the sword only. He flung the head over the wall also. Then he had only to clap on another head to the corpse and you all imagined a totally new man.<sup>43</sup>

Father Brown, with no little discomfort, once again unmask the criminal, revealing all the details. But what was the motive of the murder?

The intuitive and insightful English priest had understood that the atheist Valentin could no

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40 *Ibidem.*, p. 36.

41 *Ivi.*

42 G. K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross* cit., p. 12.

43 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret Garden* cit., p. 38.

longer stand the fact that the multimillionaire Mr. Brayne was thinking of joining the Catholic church and that perhaps he was also even thinking of leaving all his money to that church:

But did you ever see in that cold, grey eye of his that he is mad? He would do anything, *anything*, to break what he calls the superstition of the Cross. He has fought for it and starved for it, and now he has murdered for it.<sup>44</sup>

In this story Chesterton breaks the fundamental rule which, according to Ronald Knox, the detective himself must not commit the crime. The breaking of this rule is used by Chesterton to brilliantly demonstrate that fanaticism is not so much the consequence of an excess of religious zeal, but that also totalizing atheism can lead man to fanaticism and to commit a crime. Valentin, in fact, would have done *anything* for what he calls ‘the superstition of the Cross’, blinded by his hatred of all religions he kills the neo-catholic multimillionaire, and once he has crossed the limit he cannot help killing himself.

### **1.3 The Secret of Knowledge**

Of all Father Brown’s abilities the most effective is also the most singular: it consists, in fact, in a shocking identification with the criminal. The short stories in which this characteristic appears most prominently are undoubtedly *The Secret of Father Brown* and *The Secret of Flambeau*. These stories are different if compared to the others, because they do not deal with an enigma, but rather the explanation of it. Both the stories are collected in *The Secret of Father Brown*, and they are respectively the first and the last story, but one is actually the sequel of the other.

Time has passed, and Flambeau, retired from the profession of private detective and having resumed his real family name of Duroc, had decided to move to Spain. At the time, he is living there, in a castle, married to a Spanish Lady and has started a family. One morning, Father Brown

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<sup>44</sup> *Ivi.*

arrives for a “long-desired but long-delayed visit”<sup>45</sup>; the two friends have not been able to see each other for ages. After the English priest has been introduced to all the family, he makes a new acquaintance: Mr. Grandison Chace from Boston. He is Flambeau’s neighbour and friend, who had heard of Father Brown’s celebrated enterprises and became curious. From this point onwards the story takes the form of the interview, during which the little priest is asked to reveal his ‘secret’ method of investigation.

Father Brown explicitly declares that he rejects the investigative methods of modern psychologists and criminologists, which “mean getting *outside* a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect”<sup>46</sup>, who stare “at the shape of [their] criminal skull as if it were a sort of eerie growth, like a horn on a rhinoceros’s nose”<sup>47</sup>. These investigative attitudes lead to false assumptions which lead, in turn, to false conclusions. In his opinion, it is useless to study the criminal as if it were a rare type of man which needs to be identified. So how does the little English priest succeed in finding the murderer? It is simple, as he says at a certain point, causing the reader to start from his seat:

You see, it was I who killed all those people. [...] I had murdered them all myself. So, I knew how it was done. [...] I had planned out each of the crimes very carefully. I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was.<sup>48</sup>

Father Brown’s secret, as he explains to his interviewer, is quite shocking, but his method consists of a deep and genuine identification with the murderer:

I don’t try to get outside the man. I try to get inside the murderer. [...] I am always inside a man, moving his arms, and legs, but I wait till I know I am inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions; till I have bent myself into the posture of his hunched and peering hatred; till I see the world with his bloodshot and squinting eyes, looking between the blinkers of his

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45 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Father Brown* [1927], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 461-467, p. 461.

46 *Ibidem.*, p. 465.

47 *Ivi.*

48 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Father Brown* cit., p. 464.

half-witted concentration; looking up the short and sharp perspective of a straight road to a pool of blood. Till I am really a murderer.<sup>49</sup>

Although the method is not scientific, this is the method apparent in the astonishing solutions of the most intricate cases of murders in which Father Brown is involved as a detective. This profound identification with the criminal he terms a 'religious exercise'.

Chesterton confessed in his *Autobiography*:

I calculated that I must have committed at least fifty-three murders [...] and I strongly recommend the young student, except in extreme cases, to give expression to his criminal impulses in this form; and not run the risk of spoiling a beautiful and well-proportioned idea by bringing it down to the plane of brute material experiment.<sup>50</sup>

Coming back to Father Brown and his 'religious exercise', it is interesting to notice that his process of imaginative identification does not have the validity of a 'scientific' proof, but it is a way of proceeding absolutely compatible with reason. And, according to Father Brown, and also to Chesterton, more than to draw conclusions, it allows the protagonist to see. This is a form of knowledge which combines rationality, imagination and vision. The solution of a case is for Father Brown like an adventure of the eye, a picture which composes itself and materializes in front of the detective-sleuth. But, to put imagination in the service of reason is possible only for those who have a flexible conception of reason and do not consider it as the inflexible measure of all things.

In the short story *The Secret of Flambeau*, the interview between Mr. Duroc's friend and Father Brown continues. The little English priest continues to explain his method but Mr. Chace is ever more dubious about his approach, as if there were something unnatural about his small figure, as

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49 *Ibidem.*, pp. 465-466.

50 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography cit.*, p. 317.

“he [feels] as if he [is] talking to one man and yet to a hundred murderers”.<sup>51</sup> According to Chace, Father Brown’s identification with the criminal might make him a little too tolerant of crime. But it is just the opposite; the priest knows that man is enslaved by sin and for that reason he thinks that everyone is a potential murderer. By thinking that a crime is horrible just because it could have been committed by himself, Father Brown is able to make the criminal see the error of his ways. A practical example of all this occurs at the end of the story. Chace is arguing that it is simple to talk about thieves and murderers “sitting here in Mr. Duroc’s nice, comfortable house [...] safe by the fireside”<sup>52</sup>, knowing that “there is not a criminal in the room”<sup>53</sup>. But suddenly, Mr. Duroc makes his entrance into the room, presented in the form of a sinister figure:

his huge shadow flung from the fire seemed to cover everything and darken even the very night above him<sup>54</sup>

Mr. Duroc introduces himself to Chace as Flambeau, the celebrated criminal hunted by the police of two hemispheres. Flambeau confides to his friend Chace about his past, of which he was unaware, telling him of his experiences. He relates that he had stolen for twenty years but that, thanks only to Father Brown, he had stopped:

Only my friend told me that he knew exactly why I stole; and I have never stolen since.<sup>55</sup>

After Flambeau has revealed these details of his past, the ex-thief is ready to be taken to the police, but Chace points out that they are friends, and that he could not imagine any man double-crossing another under such circumstances and asks the priest: “Could you conceive any man being such a Judas?”.<sup>56</sup> Father Brown of course, answers affirmatively.

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51 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Flambeau* [1927], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 584-588, p. 585.

52 *Ibidem.*, p. 587.

53 *Ivi.*

54 *Ivi.*

55 G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Flambeau* cit., p. 588.

56 *Ivi.*

#### **1.4 Judging and Knowing**

In the story *The Hammer of God*, Norman Bohun, an ex-colonel leading a dissipated life, is killed while strolling under the bell-tower of the church of Bohun Beacon, a little village perched on a hill. Colonel Bohun's corpse is found stretched out in the courtyard of the smithy, his head smashed in by a small hammer. Many people in the village arouse suspicions, and each character who appears in the story gives his own explanation of the deed according to his personal view of life. But it will not be through hasty judgments that the case will be resolved.

Gibbs, the village cobbler, who is an atheist, blames Simeon the blacksmith. According to Gibbs, only Simeon, in fact, thanks to his enormous strength would be able to commit the crime, underlining also the fact that the murderer was his own wife's lover. But the blacksmith has a cast-iron alibi, he was out of town with two of his friends.

Then, it comes the doctor's judgment, the man of science blames the blacksmith's wife, according to him, only a woman would decide to use a small hammer to kill someone, and he adds: "nine times out of ten the person who most hates the wife's lover is the wife".<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Father Brown answers: "your mental science is really suggestive. It is your physical science that is utterly impossible".<sup>58</sup> According to the priest, in fact, no woman would ever be able to strike such a powerful blow.

Also the blacksmith, being a Puritan, had his personal idea on the matter. He says: "I think no thing of flesh held that hammer"<sup>59</sup>, he believes that the divine force stroke the blow in order to punish the victim for his sins. In the end, Father Brown, is again able to uncover the enigma, and

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57 G. K. Chesterton, *The Hammer of God* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 118-131, p. 125.

58 G. K. Chesterton, *The Hammer of God* cit., p. 125.

59 *Ibidem.*, p. 127.

starts explaining that the solution is much simpler as “the force that smashed that skull was a force well known to scientists – one of the most frequently debated of the laws of nature.”<sup>60</sup>

The last hypothesis on the murderer is made by Reverend Wilfred, a Presbyterian priest, who is also the brother of the victim. He accuses Mad Joe, arguing that “a maniac in his paroxysm may have the strength of ten men.”<sup>61</sup> According to him, the lunatic might have taken the little hammer and delivered a powerful blow. Apparently, the only unassailable accusation.

Wilfred’s hypothesis seems correct, but Father Brown states that: “it is not the true one”<sup>62</sup>, he knows, in fact, who the real murderer is. Retracing the reverend’s steps of that morning, the sleuth-priest understands which were his feelings towards his dissipated brother. Wilfred went up to pray, ever higher, ever nearer to God and to forget Norman’s shallowness. At the top of the bell tower the world seems very little to him, and Norman scuttles into view like an irritating insect and “he thought it was given to *him* to judge the world and strike down the sinner”.<sup>63</sup>

Wilfred, thinking himself closer to God, proxy to Him indeed, takes it upon himself to decide for his brother’s life.

It might be said that the position in which Wilfred puts himself exposes him to the sin. In fact, as Father Brown says: “there is something rather dangerous about standing on these high places even to pray” and adds:

heights [is] made to be looked at, not to be looked from.<sup>64</sup>

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60 *Ibidem.*, p. 128.

61 *Ibidem.*, p. 126.

62 *Ivi.*

63 *Ibidem.*, p. 130.

64 G. K. Chesterton, *The Hammer of God* cit., p. 129.



On the contrary, Father Brown observes the world from the opposite perspective: not judging from the height of a pedestal, but with extreme humility, he puts himself at the same level as his neighbour.

Also for this reason, Father Brown does not condemn the guilty Presbyterian priest, but he promises that he will never tell anyone about his sin, as if their talk were under the sacrament of confession. It will be Wilfred himself who, after having experienced Father Brown's sympathy, confesses his sin to the authorities.

### **1.5 Father Brown vs Sherlock Holmes**

Small, innocent, apparently naïve, a silent, credulous and seemingly silly representative of an obscurantist and old-fashioned religion, he pulls the solution of the case out of his wide-brimmed clergyman's hat portraying himself as a detective-priest. With him Chesterton, resorting to the art of paradox of which he was master, was able to create an immense character precisely because he was small. A detective very similar in some ways to the numerous contemporary colleagues, but for other reasons deeply different.

It is important not to forget that precisely in those years Sherlock Holmes by Conan Doyle shot to fame, whose first detective story was *A Study in Scarlet* of 1887, and in his wake journals and magazines, but also the bookshops, filled up with detective fiction stories, whose protagonist was nearly always a private detective or an amateur detective. Father Brown places himself in this current, but he also distinguishes himself clearly. To some extent, he is a critique from the inside; not of the genre, of course, which Chesterton was fond of, as his various essays on detective fiction testify, but of the philosophy which can be read between the lines, particularly, of the case of Sherlock Holmes.

Father Brown's short stories are tiny and delightful puzzles, but in them there is always a hidden moral, often flawed. Although the story is always very well devised, it is not an end in itself: there is no story in which, even though in an exchange of cues between characters, Chesterton does not insert some polemics lines or some defense of his theory. Of the celebrated Sherlock Holmes Father Brown is almost the opposite.

Father Brown's physical appearance is absolutely plain and dull. Let's see how Sherlock Holmes instead appears to Watson the first time he meets him:

His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch, as I frequently had occasion to observe when I watched him manipulating his fragile philosophical instruments.<sup>65</sup>

Watching the differences in the physical appearance, two different ways of discovering the criminal characterizes them. A typical Holmes' sentence, or to better say a typical motto, is:

when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.<sup>66</sup>

In practice even if what remains in an investigation led by a process of elimination might seem queer, if it is the only logical outcome it does not have to be the correct one, and only an accurate double-check may verify what has been deduced. It is what Holmes called the technique of abduction, or simply, deduction techniques which with him rise to the level of science. It is widely known that the detective who lives with Watson in Baker Street, is taken from the figure of Joseph Bell, a brilliant doctor Doyle really met and for whom he felt great admiration thanks

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65 A. Conan Doyle, *The Science of Deduction*, in *A study in Scarlet* [1887], London, Ward Lock & Co., pp. 16-33, p. 52.

66A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* [1890], London, Gryphon Books, p. 47.

to his wonderful deductive ability. Doyle met Dr. Bell while he was at college and became his assistant for an year before graduating. Bell effectively helped the police in some cases, one among the others was that of Jack the Ripper, and gave his contribution to the birth of legal medicine.

As it has been pointed out by Carlo Ginzburg, in his essay *Spie*, Doyle can be compared to Freud and Morelli (the latter, a scholar of nineteenth-century Italian painting) in their common, original method of arriving at the whole Truth starting from factual clues. All three through trails apparently infinitesimal, symptoms in Freud, pictorial traces in Morelli and piece of proof in Holmes, are able to grasp a deeper truth otherwise inaccessible. The explanation of this analogy is simple, all three shares the so-called ‘circumstantial method’:

In tutti e tre i casi s'intravede il modello della semeiotica medica: la disciplina che consente di diagnosticare le malattie inaccessibili all'osservazione diretta sulla base di sintomi superficiali.<sup>67</sup>

Ginzburg, at the end of his essay, seems to underline the limits that a too rigorous circumstantial method can involve. The scientific-quantitative process that Holmes follows in his investigations can lead him to the identification of the criminal, but not to the ability of gathering the criminal's deep motivations which push him to the crime. Giuseppe Bonura, in his introduction to *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes*, depicts Doyle as a typical representative of that imperialist and pragmatic England, who lived under the supremacy of Queen Victoria, an age of great economic growth but, as it is known, of much moral rigidity. Bonura, quoting Herbert Marcuse, the representative philosopher of the 1968 movement, reminds how capitalism transformed the complexity of man into ‘a one-dimensional man’ that is to say, a man who lives only the

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<sup>67</sup> C. Ginzburg, *Spie, Radici di un paradigma indiziario*, in *Miti Emblemi Spie*, Torino, Einaudi, 1922, pp. 158-209, p. 165.

horizontal dimension which is materialist and anti-spiritual. And Holmes is a one-dimensional man.

This is how Watson describes Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*:

SHERLOCK HOLMES -- his limits.

1. Knowledge of Literature. -- Nil.
2. Philosophy. -- Nil.
3. Astronomy. -- Nil.
4. Politics. -- Feeble.
5. Botany. -- Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.
6. Geology. -- Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.
7. Chemistry. -- Profound.
8. Anatomy. -- Accurate, but unsystematic.
9. Sensational Literature. -- Immense. He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century.
10. Plays the violin well.
11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.
12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law.<sup>68</sup>

Poor in humanities, unconcerned with politics, Holmes deals only with those techniques that can help him to solve a detective enigma. Scientism and positivism are in him total and all-absorbing. He never wonders for example, (about the crimes he analysis) if they are fruit of the evil which is inside human nature or whether they are fruit of the evil which springs from the organization of a certain society.<sup>69</sup> Chesterton himself, after all, in his essay dedicated to Sherlock Holmes, after having deeply praised Doyle for giving birth to “la sola creatura letteraria che sia realmente passata nella vita e nella lingua del popolo, diventando un essere vivente come Babbo Natale”<sup>70</sup>,

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68 A. Conan Doyle, *The Science of Deduction*, in *A Study in Scarlet* cit., pp. 21-22.

69 Cf. G. Bonura, *Introduzione*, in *Le Avventure di Sherlock Holmes*, Roma, Newton, 2010, pp. 7-13, p.11.

70 G. K. Chesterton, *Sherlock Holmes*, in *Come si scrive un giallo* cit., p. 62.

singles out what, according to him, is the main error in Holmes' conception: "rappresentare l'investigatore indifferente alla filosofia e alla poesia, con l'implicazione che la filosofia e la poesia non vadano bene per un investigatore".<sup>71</sup> What seems to annoy Chesterton most is that Conan Doyle, spreading the idea that practical logic is unpoetic, might have encouraged the idea that imagination has to be inaccurate, banishing all the imaginative people in a very far away hyperuranium. On the contrary, according to him, "l'uomo immaginativo non potrebbe mai essere distratto".<sup>72</sup> His essay continues further specifying whom Chesterton is speaking of: the poet and mystic whose common secret is " il senso della preziosità di ogni cosa: la preziosità dell'intero universo, che è come un vaso raffinato e fragile".<sup>73</sup>

Father Brown's superiority to Holmes is therefore to be found on a cultural and philosophical level. Father Brown is not a one-dimensional man, apart from being a man of wide interests, ranging over a startling variety of fields, he is a leading expert of the human soul and of the mystery of evil. It could not be otherwise for a person who spends most of his time in the confessional. Concerning this, the chapter in the *Autobiography* entitled *The God with the Golden Key* is emblematic. There he tells the genesis of the first Father Brown short story: *The Blue Cross*. There, Father Brown is the alter ego of Father O'Connor, the Irish priest who from their first meeting struck Chesterton for his deep knowledge of the depravity of the human soul. Chesterton, a victim of the prejudice that a priest, locked between the walls of his cloister, knows very little about the depths of iniquity, had to change his mind and understood the extraordinary knowledge that the priest had about "all the solid Satan which [he] knew and warred against with all his life".<sup>74</sup> To save the man from the evil is Father Brown's mission as a priest, which leads

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71 G. K. Chesterton, *Sherlock Holmes*, in *Come si scrive un giallo cit.*, p. 67.

72 *Ibidem.*, p. 68.

73 *Ivi.*

74 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography cit.*, p. 323.

him to meet and take care of the criminals, and it is also his mission of the bearer of Truth which engages him to solve the enigmas:

“I know the Unknown God” said the little priest, with an unconscious grandeur of certitude that stood up like a granite tower. “I know his name; it is Satan. The true God was made flesh and dwelt among us. And I say to you, wherever you find men ruled merely by mystery, it is the mystery of iniquity.”<sup>75</sup>

Chesterton confessed in his *Autobiography* that he dabbled with Spiritualism during a particular difficult period of his youth. He always strongly felt the presence of Evil among human beings, the Evil which often takes the form of the Mystery. True mystery is something we see, but yet we do not grasp:

“I mean that we here are on the wrong side of the tapestry” answered Father Brown. “The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else.”<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, the world in which we live has not in itself a meaning: it is ‘the wrong side of the tapestry’ where the lines barely allow us to spot the weave of the drawing, still the drawing exists. Man’s task is therefore to find the meaning, to untangle himself from the web of signs, in order to read between the lines of the world. That is why Father Brown cannot leave a mystery unresolved, because the mystery which remains hidden in the shadow is an unfair mystery, the uncovered Mystery instead reveals the providential drawing of the God of Jesus.

A further contrast between Holmes and Father Brown is in the most characterizing aspect of a detective: his method of investigation. Father Brown would never be intent on classifying the different types of cigar ashes, as his most celebrated colleague. Flaunting an apparently absent-minded attitude, but actually ever vigilant, asking himself and bystanders queer and banal questions, he lingers over some details, which, suddenly, piece themselves together in his mind as

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75 G. K. Chesterton, *The Purple Wig* [1914], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 244-255, p. 253.

76 G. K. Chesterton, *The Sins of Prince Saradine* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 103-118, p. 110.

a limpid image. This is what happens in the story *The Queer Feet*. Father Brown, finding himself in an isolated room of a restaurant, hears some queer feet which arouse his curiosity: “Father Brown had the kind of head that cannot help asking questions; and on this apparently trivial question his head almost split”.<sup>77</sup> After having put himself to listen again:

his brain was growing darker and darker, like his room. Yet, as he began to think steadily, the very blackness of his cell seemed to make his thought more vivid; he began to see as in a kind of vision the fantastic feet capering along the corridor in unnatural or symbolic attitudes.<sup>78</sup>

And after another span of time spent listening and reflecting, “the rational part of him (whether the wise or not) regained its supremacy”.<sup>79</sup> He waits for a while and then he leaves the room, passing through the cloakroom, where an elegant man (Flambeau the thief) takes him for the cloakroom attendant and asks him for his coat. In that instant:

he had lost his head. His head was always most valuable when he had lost it. In such moments he put two and two together and made four million. Often the Catholic Church (which is wedded to common sense) did not approve of it. Often he did not approve of it himself. But it was a real inspiration – important at rare crisis – when whosoever shall lose his head the same shall save it.<sup>80</sup>

At that stage, the sleuth-priest is not only able to uncover the mystery of the queer feet, but he is able also to make the criminal confess and to induce him to give the booty back.

Analyzing Father Brown’s approach it is possible to find the basic principal of his method of investigation. He becomes suspicious for a mysterious element, “he smelt evil as a dog smells rats”,<sup>81</sup> so he starts scrutinizing what he sees: he looks, smells, or rather, paraphrasing St Thomas Aquinas, whom Chesterton was a great admirer of, he uses the *ratio naturalis*, that form of rational knowledge that all people obtain from the trivial acceptance of what they register through

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77 G. K. Chesterton, *The Queer Feet* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 39-53, p. 42.

78 *Ibidem.*, p. 43.

79 *Ivi.*

80 *Ibidem.*, p. 44.

81 *Ibidem.*, p. 43.

the senses.<sup>82</sup> The next step, nevertheless, is to assign to what he has understood a deeper meaning, or paraphrasing Aquinas again, to transform the sensitive species into intelligible universal species. The preciousness of the entire universe, which is dear to the mystic's heart, smashed by evil like a fragile and refined pot, must be restored. Thanks to a sort of leap, which only faith is able to perform, a sort of epiphany, the detective-priest can dissipate the darkness of mystery and make the light of Truth shine.

If, according to Holmes, the process of investigation is the sole *raison d'être* of a detective and his only chance of pleasure, so much that he falls into melancholy and turns to drugs when he has nothing to detect, to Father Brown instead investigation is nothing more than an accident, a consequence of his mission as a priest. In the story *The Chief Mourner of Marne*, Father Brown tries to convince his interlocutors to forgive a murderer with these words:

we have to touch such men, not with a bargepole, but with a benediction, he said. "We have to say the word that will save them from the hell. We alone are left to deliver them from despair."<sup>83</sup>

While Holmes's task is to hand the criminal over to worldly justice, Father Brown's first preoccupation is that of making the sinner able to face the divine justice: "Leave us with the men who commit the mean and revolting and real crimes; mean as St. Peter when the cock crew, and yet the dawn came."<sup>84</sup>

To conclude, it is appropriate to highlight how the existential paths of the two authors appear specular and opposed. Doyle born in 1859, from being a Catholic (he came from a family of Irish origins) became a rationalist-scientist. He wrote inflamed articles in favour of the Anglo-Boer War, only to abandon his faith in science at the end of his life and dedicate himself to spiritualism

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82 Cf. P. Morganti, Introduzione, in *Il Candore di Padre Brown*, Morganti Editori, pp. 7-14, p. 8.

83 G. K. Chesterton, *The Chief Mourner of Marne* [1927], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 567-584, p. 583.

84 Ivi.



and the paranormal, coming even to believe in the fairies, as his publication of *The Coming of the Fairies* in 1922 witnesses. Chesterton, born in 1874 to a bourgeois family of Anglican denomination, grew up surrounded by a rationalist and agnostic cultural environment, and after a deep personal crisis he became involved in spiritualism. Once recovered from the depression in which he had sunk, he started to profess an optimism which little by little led him to completely embrace the faith. A passionate journalist, he defended the Boer from the English imperialist aggression. Finally, as it is widely known, he espoused the Catholic faith in 1922, thanks to Father Brown's alter ego, his dearest friend Father O'Connor, who will also have the task of celebrating his funeral.

## **2. Three kinds of Murderers**

“Some time ago, seated at ease upon a summer evening and taking a serene review of an indefensibly fortunate and happy life, I calculated that I must have committed at least fifty-three murders, and been concerned with hiding about half a hundred corpse for the purpose of the concealment of crimes”.<sup>85</sup> With these words Chesterton ironically confesses in his autobiography to having performed terrible wickedness on paper during his long career as a writer of detective fiction. Apologizing with the reader for so much cruelty, our author seems to remind us that inside each of us a potential murderer is hidden. Many of those crimes are contained in the stories of Father Brown, a little priest who, as it has already been pointed out, thanks to his pastoral experience as a Catholic confessor, is able to identify himself in the criminal mind of the killer. Nevertheless, the crimes are not all the same, some of them engage Father Brown more than others in the difficult task of the pursuit of truth.

The purpose of this chapter is to classify these crimes according to the philosophical characteristics of the murderers.

### **2.1 ‘Human’ Murderers**

In a first group of short stories it is possible to detect criminals who are the less guilty, or rather the most human among the guilty, those who commit a crime as people trip on a stone, stumbling along the way. They are to some extent ‘human’ murderers, a term which sounds like an oxymoron but which is useful to remind us, through Father Brown’s method, that there is a murderer hidden in each and every man, and that anyone can be mean, too mean, and that he can be good only if he wants it. Towards this type of murderer the narrator of the story, who shares the sleuth-priest’s point of view, seems to feel a sort of sympathy which leads him, to some

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<sup>85</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 317.

extent, to minimize the gravity of the committed crime, as it happens in the short story *The Vanishing of Vaudrey*, taken from the collection *The Secret of Father Brown* of 1926.

The story narrates the vanishing of Sir Arthur Vaudrey, man with a large estate and owner of a little village. The occurrence took place during a short walking from his house to the village. Since the old gentleman was not home by nightfall, Sybill Rye, Arthur's ward, called his friend, Father Brown. From here the investigation of our dearest little priest commences. After a careful search of the river which links Vaudrey's house with the rest of the village, Father Brown is able at least to find Sir Arthur's corpse, floating with a cut throat and his face still smiling. Given that no many men smile while their throats are being cut, this paradoxical fact, beyond horror, arouses a certain amount of astonishment, to the point that the priest makes a queer observation:

that smile, combined with those gooseberry eyes of his that always seemed standing out of his head, is enough, no doubt, to explain the expression. But it's true, *things look different upside down*. Artists often turn their drawings upside down to test their correctness. Sometimes, when it's difficult to turn the object itself upside down (as in the case of the Matterhorn, let us say), they have been known to stand on their heads, or at least look between their legs.<sup>86</sup>

The paradox of Arthur's smiling face is an important element of the riddle. Father Brown through the theme of the inversion of the perspective, tries, indeed, to explain it: yet again, according to the priest and to Chesterton things are not always as they appear, sometimes to get to the solution we need to see things from a different perspective. This ability, in fact, signals that in the priest's mind truth is starting to emerge. After having excluded that the old gentleman might have attempted to commit suicide in that way, the priest is able to unravel the mystery: it is John Dalmon, the fiancé of Arthur's ward, Sybill Rye, the real murderer. He, while Arthur was sitting on the seat of a barber, grabbed the razor and cut his throat.

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<sup>86</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Vanishing of Vaudrey* [1927], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 526-541, p. 533.

The riddle seems clear now, but what was the motive? To better grasp this case, as Chesterton suggests, we ought to look at the facts from a different perspective, so that those who seems guilty will be ‘forgiven’, while those who seems innocent will be ‘condemned’.

Father Brown, thanks to a brief talk to Evan Smith, Arthur’s secretary, learns that Arthur had accommodated Sybill Rye in his house after she had been abandoned without money as a waif. When she comes of age, Sir Arthur had proposed to her, but she refused, since she had come to know an old crime committed by Arthur and therefore felt horror for him. Strangely, Arthur took it kindly, and when John Dalmon started to court her, he did not oppose their union.

But the small and cunning priest knows that things are not always as they appear, and Arthur’s seeming kindness is immediately unmasked. The true story of the crime perpetrated by the old gentlemen, in fact, reveals Arthur’s darkest side: “it was a rather curious story about an Egyptian official who had insulted him by saying that a good Moslem would avoid swine and Englishmen”.<sup>87</sup> Some years later, when the official came to England the quarrel renewed and Arthur imprisoned the man in a pig-sty for an entire night, causing the breaking of his arm and leg.

Because of this old crime, Sybill Rye refused to marry Arthur, but he, blinded by pride and hatred, organized a diabolic plot to take revenge on Sybill, who dared to refuse his hand, by blackmailing Dalmon. At this point, between Father Brown and Evan there is a sort of misunderstanding: the priest talks about a horrible tale of hatred, referring to Arthur’s plot, while the young man thinks that he is referring to the murder performed by Dalmon. The priest explains instead:

I wasn’t thinking about that. I didn’t mean the murder in the barber’s shop, when- when I say a horrible tale of vengeance. I was thinking of a much more horrible tale than that; though of course, that was horrible enough, in its way.

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<sup>87</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Vanishing of Vaudrey* cit., p. 535.

But that was much more comprehensible; *almost anybody might have done it. In fact, it was very nearly an act of self-defence.*<sup>88</sup>

From these words, it would seem that Father Brown firmly wants to attenuate the responsibility of the murderer by saying that many in his shoes would have done the same. In the priest's eyes Dalmon is a 'human' murderer, which does not mean that what he did was not horrible, but it was undoubtedly 'more comprehensible' compared to the diabolic plot of revenge cooked up by Arthur. Father Brown explains:

When we found the body, you remember, we saw the face upside down; and you said it looked like the face of a fiend. Has it occurred to you that the murderer also saw the face upside down, coming behind the barber's chair? "But that's all morbid extravagance", remonstrated his companion. "I was quite used to the face when it was the right way up." Perhaps, [answers Father Brown] you have never seen it the right way up, said Father Brown. I told you that artists turn a picture the wrong way up when they want to see it the right way up. Perhaps, over all those breakfasts and tea-tables, you had got used to the face of a fiend.<sup>89</sup>

Father Brown with these words underlines that it was impossible to Evan to understand Arthur's real nature, a corrupt nature and profoundly infected by sin for the simple reason that modern man has lost the capacity of discernment.

The strong image of the inversion of perspective and of the upside-down man is here presented, as it frequently recurs in Chesterton's works, both in fiction and essays. It particularly recurs in the final chapter of one of his more enlightened essays: *Orthodoxy*. Chesterton, here, is trying to make capital of the most extraordinary aspects of Christianity, also of those aspects apparently more obscure and unpopular:

All the real argument about religion turns on the question of whether a man who was born upside down can tell when he comes right way up. The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. That is the inmost philosophy of the Fall.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Vanishing of Vaudrey* cit., p. 538.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 539.

<sup>90</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p. 235.

It is clear therefore that Evan, flawed as all men by original sin, ought to engage himself in a change of perspective to be able to detect Truth and discern good from evil. As Chesterton wrote, again in *Orthodoxy*:

To the modern man the heavens are actually below the earth. The explanation is simple; he is standing on his head; which is a very weak pedestal to stand on. But when he has found his feet again he knows it. Christianity 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.<sup>91</sup>

It is the faith therefore that allows Father Brown not to lose his deep serenity even before the most diabolic criminal plot, but mostly it is his faith that allows him, like an artist, to turn over the picture and let him read the truth in the right perspective.

It is Vaudrey who organized a devilish plot:

of course, Sir Arthur was not actually a fiend; he was a man with a character which he had made out of a temperament that might also have been turned to good. [...] You know, there are physical bodies on which a wound will not heal. Sir Arthur had a mind of that sort. It was as if it lacked a skin; he had a feverish vigilance of vanity; those strained eyes were open with an insomnia of egoism. Sensibility need not be selfishness. Sybill Rye, for instance, has the same thin skin and manages to be a sort of saint. But Vaudrey had turned it all to poisonous pride; a pride that was not even secure and self-satisfied. Every scratch on the surface of his soul festered.<sup>92</sup>

Pushed by an immense wounded pride, he planned therefore to take revenge on the young Sybill who had dared to reject him. By blackmailing Dalmon, he forced him to get engaged to her. Sir Arthur had unearthed a crime in Dalmon's past, and thanks to this piece of information he had him in his power. Once Dalmon had married Sybill, Arthur would have denounced him, condemning the girl to be forever the wife of a prisoner awaiting execution:

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<sup>91</sup> Ibidem., pp. 237-238.

<sup>92</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Vanishing of Vaudrey* cit., p. 539.

a girl, little more than a child, refused to marry him, because he had once been a sort of criminal; had, indeed, been in prison for a short time for outrage on the Egyptian. And that madman said, in the hell of his heart: "She shall marry a murderer".<sup>93</sup>

The event ends with a revealing comment of Evan's: "all my hatred of poor Dalmon is gone out of me – now I know how he was twice a murderer".<sup>94</sup> The reader too forgoes his aversion for this double murderer who finds himself tangled in a devilish plot and who committed the crime, only because he was forced to do so by circumstances. Much more serious is instead the condemnation for what Arthur had planned: a vengeance which on a legal level might seem less important than Dalmon's crimes, but about whose utter cruelty Father Brown has no doubts.

## **2.2 Idolater Murderers**

Arthur's dark feeling of vengeance, mentioned by Father Brown is a good introduction to the analysis of other short stories in which crimes are the final consequence of a deep derangement. In these stories the crime is always waiting around the corner and easy as a solution. The murderers of this group of stories are men who found their entire existence on powerful passions, which tend to obscure all the rest. While in Dalmon the murder was the fruit of a sudden weakness, which lasts just the time of the crime and is immediately replaced by remorse, in Arthur and in this second type of criminals, the theft or the murder are always the sign of a mental narrowness. The deeds are justified in the eyes of those who commit them by an excessive worshipped and adored feeling or an object of passionate devotion which acquires in them a totalizing role, disproportionate to its real importance: it is the idol that demands the crime. That is why the wickedness often coincides with a lack of cleverness: idolaters, by considering only one single passion, are not able to look at the world with a wider glance.

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<sup>93</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Vanishing of Vaudrey* cit., p. 540.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 540.

In the short story *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, taken from the collection *The Wisdom of Father Brown* of 1914, a tale of two journalists' bizarre adventure is told. The American Calhoun Kidd is the U.K. correspondent of the great American daily called the *Western Sun*, and the Irish James Dalroy works as a reporter for an English 'gossip mag' called *Smart Society*. After ironically comparing English and American journalism, the narrator makes the two journalists meet in 'a genuine feudal old-country inn' while "the last of a summer sunset clung about Cumnor and the low wooden hills"<sup>95</sup> which surrounded Oxford. The American finds himself in this pleasing landscape because he has a meeting with John Boulnois, a modest man who has published a series of articles on some weak points of Darwin's Evolution Theory. These articles, which were known in the academic environment of Oxford as 'Catastrophism', became very popular in America and were covered widely in the press, but completely ignored by English newspapers, effectively very little inclined to move away from prevalent cultural trends. The American journalist, thanks to a chat in the inn comes to know from the Irishman that bashful Boulnois is an old friend and neighbour of Claude Champion, one of the brightest and wealthiest English aristocrats, very well-known as a sportsman, traveller, politician, dabbler in art, music, literature and acting. This forerunner of the modern jet set, or rather upholder of Renaissance lavishness, is the object of numerous rumours circulating in English newspapers about his, never denied, love affair with John Boulnois' wife, a young and attractive actress.

On that night, Mr Kidd would have to interview Boulnois on Catastrophism, while the Irishman was to act in an open-air performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, where he plays Romeo and Mrs Boulnois plays Juliet. The night promised plenty of spicy news to be reported in *Smart Society*. After having left the Irishman to his whisky, Mr Kidd reaches Boulnois' house, where he learns from the servant that Mr Boulnois has been obliged to go out suddenly to Pendragon Park, Mr

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<sup>95</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* [1914], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 292-304, p. 293.



Champion's residence. Annoyed by Boulnois' snub, the American journalist decides to go to Pendragon, entering the wood. At this point Chesterton pauses over a lyrical description of the wood, tinged with dark colours, creating an atmosphere worth of "Scott's great tragedy".<sup>96</sup> There lingers "the smell of something that died in the eighteenth century"<sup>97</sup>:

the smell of dank gardens and broken urns, of wrongs that will never now be righted; of something that is none the less incurably sad because it is strangely unreal.<sup>98</sup>

The evocation of such dramatic scenery is the prelude of a "tragic artifice"<sup>99</sup>: a shining sword of the moonlight falling near the terrified journalist who immediately notices some red drops on it and subsequently on a nearby hill he sees the figure of an agonizing man, lavishly dressed with a costume of *Romeo and Juliet*. It did not take the American journalist long to recognise him:

"that white face flung up to heaven, clean-shaven and so unnaturally young, like Byron with a Roman nose, those black curls already grizzled – he had seen the thousand public portraits of Sir Claude Champion."<sup>100</sup>

Later, Mr Kidd with James Dalroy, who had reached the scene of the crime, manage to gather the last words of the dying Claude:

Boulnois... Boulnois, I say... Boulnois did it... jealous of me...<sup>101</sup>

Probably influenced by the accumulation of romantic elements (Scott, Byron) the two journalists believed in *the mise en scène* and raise the alarm. Upon the arrival of a small Catholic priest coming to bless the body, the artifice will be revealed: after giving a cursory glance at the sword, Father Brown walks away satisfied with what he guessed. If up to this point the story was focused on the two journalists, with the entrance of Father Brown, the point of view assumed by

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<sup>96</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* cit., p. 296.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 296-297.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 297.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 297.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 298.

<sup>101</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* cit., p. 298.

the narrator is that of the priest who, later approached by Mrs Boulnois, tells her he does not believe that her husband is the murderer.

In fact, unlike the two journalists inclined to believe in facts and turn them into news, Father Brown has an eye capable of going beyond the facts, in search of moral evidence. For it is when each of us is faced with the task of fathoming another soul, he or she may appear impenetrable; but little by little, small clues come to light, helping us discover whether certain action can or cannot break out from such a soul. In this way Father Brown knows that even a murder, carries the signature of its author: “two very little things, he said. One is very trivial and the other very vague. But such as they are, they don’t fit in with Mr Boulnois being the murderer.”<sup>102</sup> He turned his bright and round face towards the stars and went on, absent-mindedly:

To take the vague idea first. I attach a good deal of importance to vague ideas. All those things that aren’t evidence’ are what convince me. I think a moral impossibility the biggest of all impossibilities. [...] Please do not think I mean that Boulnois could not be so wicked. Anybody can be wicked – as wicked as he chooses. We can direct our moral wills; but we can’t generally change our instinctive tastes and ways of doing things. Boulnois might commit a murder, but not this murder. He would not snatch Romeo’s sword from its romantic scabbard; or slay his foe on the sundial as on a kind of altar; or leave his body among the roses; or fling the sword away among the pines. If Boulnois killed anyone he’d do it quietly and heavily, as he’d do any other doubtful thing – take a tenth glass of port, or read a loose Greek poet. No, the romantic setting is not like Boulnois. It’s more like Champion.<sup>103</sup>

The priest adds that no fingerprints were found on the handle of the sword, but being on the blade they point to suicide and unmasks Champion’s diabolic plan: he kills himself by laying the responsibility for his death to Boulnois, Mrs Boulnois explains the motivation for this mad act:

he hated my husband because... it is so strange I hardly know how to say it... because... because my husband wouldn’t hate him.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibidem., p. 300.

<sup>103</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* cit., pp. 300-301.

<sup>104</sup> Ibidem., p. 301.

At this point, the young woman reveals everything about the futile attempts made by Champion over the years in order to be envied by her husband, but Boulnois, on the other hand, was completely incapable of understanding the feelings of envy. To better explain the abyss of jealousy that devoured Champion, Father Brown quotes the Bible, specifically the book of Esther:

And Haman began to tell them of all the things wherein the king had honoured him; and he said: All these things profit me nothing while I see Mordecai the Jew sitting the gate.<sup>105</sup>

We are not therefore at the centre of a romantic tragedy, as the naive American journalist believed, but in the midst of Christian drama: that of a man (Champion, as Mordecai or Cain) blinded by his own pride, burning with jealousy, willing to commit a horrible crime to punish the source of such a pain.

The conclusion of the story then takes on a comic quality. Mr Brown makes Boulnois confess to having committed a strange crime: when the American journalist came to interview him at his house, pretending to be the butler, he told him that Mr Boulnois was out. Too much was the pleasure of continuing to read his interesting book, and too boring an evening spent in interview. To Boulnois, unaware of the danger, Brown confides he will be able to lighten the punishment for his strange crime and avoid being hanged.

It is worthwhile pointing out that the fondness which the narrator reserves for this self-effacing scholar of Catastrophism is very likely related to his own studies of Darwin's errors. Chesterton had repeatedly shown the evolutionism as one of the causes of contemporary nihilism. In

*Orthodoxy* he bemoaned that:

Evolution is a good example of that modern intelligence which, if it destroys anything, destroys itself. Evolution is either an innocent scientific description of how certain earthly things came about; or, if it is anything more than this, it is an

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<sup>105</sup> Ibidem., p. 302.

attack upon thought itself. If evolution destroys anything, it does not destroy religion but rationalism. [...] there is no such thing as an ape to change, and no such thing as a man for him to change into. It means that there is no such thing as a thing. At best, there is only one thing, and that is a flux of everything and anything. This is an attack not upon faith, but upon the mind; you cannot think if you are not separate from the subject of thought. Descartes said, "I think; therefore I am." The philosophic evolutionist reverses and negatives the epigram. He says, "I am not; therefore I cannot think."<sup>106</sup>

If in this story blind jealousy was the cause of the crime, in other stories almost anything can become an idol, even a merely negative idea. As it has already been analyzed Valentin, the genial head of the French police, with the help of Father Brown captured the legendary international thief Flambeau in the Essex priest's first adventure. In the second story instead the same police officer becomes the unexpected murderer of a wealthy American. The motive is a purely negative passion, Valentin's hatred for what he calls 'the superstition of the cross', he kills to prevent the wealthy American, who was said to be close to conversion, from donating his money to his great enemy, the Church. His atheism is not just a belief, is a cause that demands any sacrifice, even that of honesty and career.

Not only atheism can lead to crime, over-devotion can do the same. As it has been seen in *The Hammer of God* the murderer is a Protestant priest, whose passion for justice and whose hatred for sin led him to act as proxy for divine retribution, using the height of the cathedral in the process, and drop a hammer on the head of his dissolute brother.

Jealousy, atheism, religious fanaticism are motives which have in common the fact that they all stem from limited intelligence, misguided because they invest their hope of happiness in a single event. But if criminal cleverness is limited, even those who try to unmask it must perform a difficult exercise of narrowing of their own intelligence. Father Brown reminds us of that in *The*

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<sup>106</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., pp. 55-56.

*Secret of Flambeau*. In this story, sequel of *The secret of Father Brown*, the priest reveals to an American visitor, Mr Chace, the secrets of his method of investigation.

Among other things, he points out that the most difficult crimes to solve are often the pettiest:

The difficulty in those cases is that you've got to make your mind small. [...] for that you've got to have a small mind. It's awfully hard to get; like focusing smaller and sharper in a wobbling camera. [...] the moment I realized what a small mind meant, I knew where to look for it.<sup>107</sup>

The antidote to the idol, to the partiality of the idol is only a philosophy, a worldview that gives everything its proper weight and role. However, also a philosophical view may be partial, and as such it can constitute the premise of a crime as it will be pointed out in the next section of this chapter.

### **2.3 Philosophical Murderers**

In a third group of stories it is possible to find crimes whose motive lies in a particular philosophical vision of the world. The story entitled *The Wrong Shape*, taken from the first collection entitled *The Innocence of Father Brown* is a good example of this group.

On a thursday before Pentecost Father Brown and his friend Flambeau pay a visit at a strange house; the house belongs to Leonard Quinton, an eccentric poet and lover of Eastern culture, who had designed his own house in order to impress passers-by. In fact, the narrator inform us that “the whole house was built upon the plan of a T, but a T with a very long cross piece and a very short tail piece. The long cross piece was the frontage that ran along in face of the street, with the front door in the middle.”<sup>108</sup> When this door is open passers-by stop, looking astonished: because the leg of the T, perfectly aligned with the front door, is a glass conservatory full of rare and spectacular tropical flowers. There are even elegant rooms with “something really like a

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<sup>107</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Secret of Flambeau* cit., p.586.

<sup>108</sup> G.. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* [1911], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 89-103, p. 89.

transformation scene in a fairy play.”<sup>109</sup> The poet’s queerness does not end there, he writes exotic verses on thin parchment, after having smoked opium and claimed that his spirit was guided through the heavens and hells of the East by an Indian hermit with a white and yellow costume who sojourned in his house for months. All this had exasperated his attractive, young wife, worn out by the hard work of running the household single-handedly.

The strange house is also frequented by Dr. Harris, the poet’s doctor, and Mr. Atkinsons, the young and penniless brother of Mrs. Quinton. Aware that Atkinson wants to hound his brother-in-law for a loan, Dr. Harris involves Father Brown and Flambeau in an investigating walk around the house. During this tour two strange things happen: the discovery of a queer knife of clear Oriental origin, whose shape, according to Father Brown, is quite *wrong*:

Don’t you see it is the wrong shape? Don’t you see that it has no hearty and plain purpose? It does not point like a spear. It does not sweep like a scythe. It does not look like a weapon. It looks like an instrument of torture.<sup>110</sup>

The second oddity is the encounter with an Indian, standing motionless in the garden, his eyes closed, in meditation. At Flambeau's greeting, the guru, without opening his eyes, answers for three times with a: “thank you, I want nothing”<sup>111</sup>, at which, the sky suddenly clouds over, so Father Brown and his friend return to the entrance of the house, while the doctor remains near the greenhouse to smoke.

That the writer of detective stories enjoys himself filling the tale with queer characters and misleading clues, in order to confuse the reader, is a quite normal thing, but Chesterton deliberately appears, here and in many other cases, to propose a series of ‘philosophical types’. On the one hand there is Quinton, a poet, lover of all that is excessive and extravagant, owner of an oddly-shaped house, ostensibly seeking creative inspiration and perhaps also a philosophical

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<sup>109</sup> Ibidem., p. 90.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem., p. 92.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem., p. 93.

explanation of existence in Oriental culture, which, however, has already led him to become addicted to opium and entirely dominated by an Indian guru and also to be the neglectful husband of a young woman who evidently does not love him anymore. On the other hand there is the Indian, who makes a deep impression on Father Brown when they meet:

when the Indian spoke to us, I had a sort of vision, a vision of him and all his universe. Yet he only said the same things three times. When first he said, 'I want nothing,' it meant only that he was impenetrable, that Asia does not give itself away. Then he said again, 'I want nothing' and I knew that he meant that he was sufficient to himself, like a cosmos, that he needed no God, neither admitted any sins. And when he said the third time, 'I want nothing,' he said it with blazing eyes. And I knew that he meant literally what he said; that nothing was his desire and his home; that he was weary for nothing as for wine; that annihilation, the mere destruction of everything or anything.<sup>112</sup>

As it is apparent from these words, there could be no greater distance between this kind of Indian asceticism and the Christian faith of Father Brown and Chesterton. Then there is Dr. Harris, who in the development of the story will turn out to be a rationalist, quite annoyed both by his patient-poet's excesses, which in his opinion are irrational and superstitious, and by the Indian whom he considers as a mystifier and a profiteer.

During a storm, which the narrator takes care to compare to the night of Coleridge, the crime takes place: the poet is found with the odd Oriental knife stuck in his side, his hand still resting on the handle. On the table a single sheet of paper with the poet's handwriting that says: "I die by my own hand; yet I die murdered!"<sup>113</sup> The sheet is oddly-shaped too, like so many things in this story, or rather *wrong*: a little corner is missing, as it is in the sheet in the whole stack of sermon paper still unused on the table. The reader, at this stage, is led to suspect the Indian as the only one capable of inducing a suicide, perhaps by means of hypnosis. And that is exactly what the real murderer wants the others to believe. But Father Brown will ask Doctor Harris to write a

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<sup>112</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* cit., p. 96.

<sup>113</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* cit., p. 97.

report of the case for his private use, in which he inevitably ends by confessing his fault. Doctor Harris himself, explains the motive of his murder, in his report:

DEAR FATHER BROWN, *Vicisti, Galilae!* Otherwise, damn your eyes, which are very penetrating ones. Can it be possible that there is something in all that stuff of yours after all? I am a man who has ever since boyhood believed in Nature and in all natural functions and instincts, whether men called them moral or immoral. [...] I loved Quinton's wife. What was there wrong in that? Nature told me to, and it is love that makes the world go round. I also thought, quite sincerely, that she would be happier with a clean animal like me than with that tormenting little lunatic. What was there wrong in that? I was only facing facts, like a man of science. She would have been happier. According to my own creed I was quite free to kill Quinton, which was the best thing for everybody, even himself.<sup>114</sup>

From these words it is evident that the crime springs from Harris' philosophical vision of life: man, scientifically and also according to Harris's view of Darwin, is nothing more than an animal among animals. But Dr. Harris also adds a special flaw in his reasoning: he made his materialistic point of view absolute, forgetting to consider the sacredness of life, and so he started to give vent to the love passion (with another intellectual flaw, because he did not take the woman and her husband's real feelings into account).

At this point the second chapter of *Orthodoxy* comes to mind, (published in 1908, only three years before *The Innocence of Father Brown*) the chapter entitled *The Maniac*. There, Chesterton had stigmatized the intellectual stances, which were fashionable at the beginning of the twentieth century: in particular Darwinism, Materialism, Skepticism and Theosophy. He writes:

the man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane, but their insanity is proved not by any error in their argument, but by the manifest mistake of their whole lives. [...] Their position is quite reasonable; nay, in a sense it is infinitely reasonable, just as a threepenny bit is infinitely circular. But there is such a thing as a mean infinity, a base and slavish eternity. It is amusing to notice that many of the moderns, whether skeptics or mystics, have taken as their sign a certain eastern symbol, which is the very symbol of this ultimate nullity. When they wish to represent eternity, they represent it by a serpent with his tail in his mouth. There is a startling sarcasm in the image of that very unsatisfactory meal. The eternity of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibidem., pp. 101-102.



the material fatalists, the eternity of the eastern pessimists, the eternity of the supercilious theosophists and higher scientists of today is, indeed, very well presented by a serpent eating his tail, a degraded animal who destroys even himself.<sup>115</sup>

The ideas put forward in this passage are neatly rounded off with these words: “We may say in summary that it is reason used without root, reason in the void. The man who begins to think without the proper first principles goes mad”<sup>116</sup>, and, we can add, he may be even pushed to kill someone. This long quote helps us understand how to Chesterton both the ascetic spiritualism of the Indian guru and the anti-spiritual materialism of Dr Harris, as partial philosophies, are devilish irruptions (the symbol of the snake is the proof of it) which push human reason to self-destruction, and as such they are both co-responsible for Quinton’s death. It was Harris who plunged the knife into the poet’s side, staging a fake suicide, but it is the accidental discovery of the oriental knife and the possibility of offloading the blame on the Indian guru that pushed the doctor to actually effect the long-meditated murdering. At the end of the story, the final twist is given by the eruption of Dr. Harris’ sense of guilty. His granitic materialistic philosophy seems to melt like snow in the sun, so much so that he experiences relief in confessing his secret to the priest:

When I had done it the extraordinary thing happened. Nature deserted me. I felt ill. I felt just as if I had done something wrong. I think my brain is breaking up; I feel some sort of desperate pleasure in thinking I have told the things to somebody; that I shall not have to be alone with it if I marry and have children. What is the matter with me? ... Madness... or can one have remorse, just as if one were in Byron’s poems! I cannot write anymore. JAMES ERSKINE HARRIS.<sup>117</sup>

Vicisti Galilaeae, are the words with which the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate, who had fought Christianity trying to revive paganism, when about to die, admits his defeat. Likewise,

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<sup>115</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 46.

<sup>117</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* cit., p.103.

with the above quoted words Dr Harris recognizes Father Brown's merit in finding the way into his ossified vision of the world.

#### **2.4 The Nightmare and the Cross**

To conclude this chapter it is appropriate to quote Borges again, remembering what he wrote on Chesterton in *Inquisiciones* (1952). As Elmar Schenkel points out, Borges thinks that in all Chesterton's detective stories it is possible to find a fundamental pattern. The reader is confronted with a very queer mystery with magic and demonic forces, but where the riddle is solved in the end by means of an ingenious trick of reason. Borges notes that the enigma is more interesting than the solution and that Chesterton could be compared to an *artifex monstrorum* (Plinio XXVII,2), for the attitude of his imagination which inevitably tends to nightmare.<sup>118</sup> In the already-quoted *Introduction* to a collection of Chesterton's short stories Borges argues that he might have been an Edgar Allan Poe or a Kafka, but he preferred to be Chesterton<sup>119</sup>.

Many of his works propose indeed an undoubtedly nightmarish atmosphere. *The Man who Was Thursday*, has *A Nightmare* as a subtitle. But, as it has often been noted, several short stories of the Father Brown's saga evoke a gothic atmosphere which sometimes leads the reader to think about the presence of magical and supernatural elements. We have seen how in *The Wrong Shape* the deed proves to be explicable on a narrative level in a rational way. But the mad and dramatic choice of committing a murder, as well as the possibility, for a soul blinded by a totalizing vision of the world, of opening itself to remorse and perhaps even repentance, do not explain

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<sup>118</sup> Cf. E. Schenkel, *Circundando el Entrecruzamiento, Entrecruzando el Circulo: sobre Borges y Chesterton*, in A. de Toro and F. de Toro Jorge Luis Borges, *Pensamiento y saber en el siglo XX*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 1999, pp. 307-319, pp. 309-310.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. J. L. Borges, *Introduzione cit.*, pp. 7-11.

themselves, as actually “the world does not explain itself”<sup>120</sup>, without recourse to Christian theology.

There is also another short story in which a nightmarish atmosphere is particularly evident. It is *The Blast of the Book*, taken from the last collection of 1935 entitled *The Scandal of Father Brown*. As it has been pointed out by Elmar Schenkel this short story contains several of Borges’ themes, like the theme of the book devourer and the theme of invisibility. The solution of this story is simple and of this world, but the central idea is very complex. Chesterton here takes on Spiritualism. Professor Openshaw is an astute examiner of psychic and paranormal phenomena, who is a fence sitter, being neither for nor against the belief in ghosts. He is indeed the personification of scientific skepticism and scientific disbelief. One day a missionary, the Reverend Luke Pringle, a man with a bushy red beard, disconcerts Professor Openshaw by showing him a book that has the power to make anyone who opens it disappear. He recounts how a Captain Wales looked at the book and was never seen again. The next victims were then Professor’s clerk Mr Berridge, the owner of the book, an Orientalist called Hankey, and finally the missionary himself. Openshaw at least is convinced the book is cursed and that five or more men have died by looking into it. But Father Brown comes to his rescue and reveals the truth of the matter proving that no person has really vanished. The question is that, since Father Brown is not open to superstition, he is the only one who has actually opened the book, only to discover blank pages in it. Everything appears to be a trick done by Openshaw’s much-neglected clerk, Berridge. The Professor, in a most Ebenezer Scroogian<sup>121</sup> way, has not paid much attention to his servant, persistently calling him Babbage, since Babbage was the inventor of a calculating machine and the calculations performed by the clerk were the only thing the Professor appreciated of him. When Berridge puts on the bearded disguise as Luke Pringle, Openshaw does

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<sup>120</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p. 99.

<sup>121</sup> The main protagonist of Dickens’s *Christmas Carol* of 1843.

not even recognize him. Brown explains that there never was a Captain Wales (a fiction created by Berridge), nor a Doctor Hankey (the doctor's home is actually Berridge's). Lastly, Brown knows the whole thing is a send-up from the start, because, "I opened it as soon as I saw it lying there. It's all blank pages. You see, I am not superstitious."<sup>122</sup> Thus, Chesterton teaches us, yet again, that it is only the excellent use of reason accompanied by the power of faith the right way to find the solution. This story is interesting for several reasons. At first sight, Borges' themes manifest themselves as transformations, loss of identity, enigmas, horror, the magic power of books, the world of writing and the magic of numbers. But while Borges uses them as tools which constitute his literary tricks, Chesterton uses superstition in order to unmask Materialism and Occultism. Openshaw embodies the materialistic vision which reduces people and things to statistics, the clerk is the proof of it, whose mispronounced surname produces social invisibility. Materialism is an archaic form of idolatry which makes it possible to efface whole sections of external reality.

Therefore, the supernatural emerges with its ominous potential summoned as the possible cause of unexplained mysteries, but dissolves itself at the end through the intervention of Father Brown, having often dramatic outcomes, as in *The Wrong Shape*, or even comical, as in *The Blast of the Book*.

Yet, to better understand the mystery which pervades all Chesterton's works it may be useful, besides the comparison with authors such as Borges, Poe and Kafka, to turn into another direction too, namely towards the romantic writers Chesterton so often cites: Scott, Byron and Coleridge. At this stage a question rises spontaneously? Why does Chesterton quote and so often refer to romantic writers?

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<sup>122</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blast of the Book* [1947], in *The Father Brown Stories* cit., pp. 620-631, p. 631.

Many of Father Brown's stories open or at least contain at the beginning extensive descriptions of serene landscapes, adorable well-maintained woodlands, small hard-working villages, spectacular sunsets and starry nights. But this setting, which can be defined as idyllic, gradually acquires the darkest colours of a dark romantic setting: it is the prelude to the crime. The references to romantic writers are many: in *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, the wood from which "the smell of dark gardens and broken urns, of wrongs that will never now be righted"<sup>123</sup> emanates an atmosphere worth – as Chesterton writes – "Scott's great tragedy"<sup>124</sup>; or the storm which breaks above the residence of Quinton the poet, in *The Wrong Shape*, is "like the night of Coleridge"<sup>125</sup>; the description of Dr. Harris' remorse is compared to that of a hero of "Byron's poems"<sup>126</sup>, and lastly in *The Blast of The Book* the evocation of "mouldy historical novels about the Family Ghosts"<sup>127</sup> prepares the setting to the theme of superstition.

This romantic repertoire mobilized first and then denied, not only serves to deceive the reader, making him suspect he is in the presence of some supernatural event and, using Freud's words, potentially perturbing. In these short stories, the fear that comes back is the horror of the mystery of iniquity, the fear of not understanding the reasons of its existence, the horror of pessimism. But this anxiety is short.

It is said that detective fiction is a reassuring literary genre, because the identification and arrest of the criminal restores the order violated by the crime. But in Chesterton's detective stories reassurance lies in something else: the serene gaze of Father Brown re-gives reason to the nightmare and it finally allows us to understand. The romantic nuance proves to be inadequate: a *wrong shape*, which is replaced by the Christian vision of Father Brown, who knows the

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<sup>123</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* cit., p. 297.

<sup>124</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* cit., p. 296.

<sup>125</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* cit., p. 97.

<sup>126</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Wrong Shape* cit., p. 103.

<sup>127</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Blast of the Book* cit., p. 621.

weakness of man, his attachment to idols and his adherence to partial philosophies that leave him at the mercy of sin.

Father Brown's task is not to restore the balance broken by the crime, by delivering a criminal to human justice in order to receive the right punishment, but to illuminate the mystery of evil through Christian theology: destroying the nightmare of pessimism, opening the heart to the hope of Grace. Father Brown's stories constantly act out the same deep structure: the horror of pessimism that comes when facing the mystery of evil and the reassurance that intellectual (Christian) optimism is possible. But, as Freud says in his essay on *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, the numerous denials do nothing but confirm with greater force what they seem to deny: nightmare and pessimism have, in fact, persistently dwelled at the door of the author's heart.

Re-reading the pages of Chesterton's *Autobiography* is easy to see how his life has followed a pattern similar to that of his own short stories: after a very happy childhood, surrounded by the idyllic love of his family, he was confronted with depression, illness and even the pain for his brother's death. He stubbornly endeavoured to escape the darkness in which he found himself the philosophies of his time. But they made him instead sink into a darker pessimism:

At this time I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. [...] Yet I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense; I was simply carrying the scepticism of my time as far as it would go. And I soon found it would go a great deal further than most of the sceptics went. While dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind. [...] The atheist told me pompously that he did not believe that there was any God; and there were moments when I did not even believe there were any atheist.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography cit.*, p. 97.

He had also dabbled in Spiritualism and Occultism, but, in the end, only embracing the madness of the cross and joining the Catholic Church, he was able to regain the happiness of his childhood. In the final pages of the *Autobiography* he recounts the impression two Cambridge students, who suspected that Father O'Connor had no experience of the world, made on him:

the incident of the Cambridge undergraduates, and their breezy contempt for the fugitive and cloistered virtue of a parish priest, stood for much more serious things in my life than my unfortunate, but merely professional, heap of corpses or massacre of characters. It brought me in a manner face to face once more with those morbid but vivid problems of soul [...] They still troubled me a good deal; but I might have sunk more and more into some sort of compromise or surrender of mere weariness, but for this sudden glimpse of the pit that is at all our feet. I was surprised at my own surprise. That the Catholic Church knew more about good than I did was easy to believe. That she knew more about evil than I did seemed incredible. When people ask me, or indeed anybody else, "Why did you join the Church of Rome?" the first essential answer, if it is partly an elliptical answer, is, "To get rid of my sins".<sup>129</sup>

In short, while the romantic writers persistently create a nightmarish and perturbing atmosphere and leave it mysterious and irrational, Chesterton thanks to reason, and thanks to faith which according to him 'was the key of this age as of every other'<sup>130</sup>, is able to get rid of that stifling anxiety and open the door of optimism.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibidem., p. 324.

<sup>130</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, cit., p. 40.

### **3. The Poet and The Lunatic**

In all of Chesterton's works, we find characters who can be defined as 'poetic', meaning by 'poetic' a character who is neither practical, nor rationalist or a man of the world. In his novel, *Manalive* (1912), the protagonist Innocent Smith is clearly poetic, while the journalist who defends him, Michael Moon, appears extremely practical and almost cynical; Cyrus Pym, an American criminologist, who is the accuser, is instead, a rationalist, and the doctor is a man of the world. In the novel *The Ball and the Cross* (1910), Evan McJan is poetic and eccentric while Turnbull is practical and sensible. Sometimes the characters, often the main protagonists, are real and proper poets; this is the case with Gabriel Syme, the protagonist of *The Man who was Thursday* (1909). Adam Wayne, the Napoleon of Notting Hill, in the eponymous novel (1904), is also a poet, even though he lacks talent. But it is precisely because he is unable to write his own poems, that he will fulfil his mission and change the world. Both Dalroy and Pump, the protagonists of *The Flying Inn* (1914), are authors of ballads.

Poets are very likely to have inspired a heartfelt affection in Chesterton and so in 1929 he published another collection of detective short stories dedicated to a poet who, paradoxically, to judge by the title, is set not among practical men or rationalists, as we might expect, but instead among lunatics. It is *The Poet and the Lunatics: Episodes of the Life of Gabriel Gale*.

Chesterton by this time was 56 years old and the process of embracing the Catholic Church was now over. He had already published various essays in which he had made the motivation of his choice public (*The Catholic Church and Conversion* in 1926 and *The Thing: Why I Am Catholic* in 1929). For this reason, perhaps, Chesterton does not feel the need, as it is the case with the Father Brown's stories, to make the protagonist immediately recognizable as the spokesman of Catholic values.



Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the main motivation behind *The Poet and the Lunatics* is a criticism of British industrial society and of the way it creates injustice and discomfort when seen through Christian faith and the social doctrine of the Church.

### **3.1 Gabriel Gale and “Merry Old England”**

The first short story of this collection entitled *The Fantastic Friends* is a sort of programmatic manifesto of the entire work. It opens with a description of an inn. Despite its name, *the Rising Sun*, it seems to have more in common with sunset since its old walls seem about to collapse under the weight of a quite intrusive ivy. The countryside around is rather melancholy, like the inn-keeper, intent on getting rid of his first, indeed, the only customer for many months, Dr Garth. The inn had once seen better days, but when the last squire shut up the path that led to the nearby ford in the river, all traffic was diverted to a new bridge a mile away.

This initial image, although functional in the development of the plot of the story, can also have a symbolic interpretation. Industrial development, supported by English imperial policy, had in fact marginalized the countryside, which in the British tradition had always been at the centre of its most authentic values. The introduction of the logic of capitalism into agriculture had made the life of farmers hard by souring the relationships between social classes. Not only was the integrity of the landscape threatened, but English identity itself was somehow threatened by the industrial civilization.

Chesterton had always been interested in these problems, discussing them in his adolescence with his brother Cecil and later dealing with them through the pages of the newspaper of which he became the editor, *The Eye Witness*, then *The New Witness*, which would eventually become *GK's Weekly*. Together with Belloc and McNabb he founded the Distributist League. This league suggested a new economic philosophy, which saw in the redistribution of land confiscated by

landowners at the time of the *Enclosures* the cure for the ills of the industrial era. Distributism was a third way, equidistant both from the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism oriented toward the stubborn accumulation of wealth and based on the exploitation of workers, and from the excesses of egalitarian and statist socialism. This third way approached instead the principles of Christian solidarity expressed in the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII in 1891: *Rerum Novarum*, who had condemned the class struggle, but who also strongly advocated the right of the workers to a just wage.<sup>131</sup>

Somehow, the opening words of the story introduce the reader into this context. Not by chance in fact, when the protagonist, Gabriel Gale, makes his appearance at the inn his friend James Hurrell, introduces him as a painter whose only “aim and glory in life is to go about repainting inns”<sup>132</sup>. The words used by the friend are particularly expressive:

My friend is very poetical; and he said it would make a sunrise all over England. Well, they say the sun never sets on the British Empire, observed the doctor, with a laugh. I don't feel it about the Empire so much, said the painter simple. [...] But one's life would be well spent in waking up the dead inns of England and making them *English* and *Christian* again. If I could do it, I would do nothing else till I die.<sup>133</sup>

The poet-painter's purpose at his first entrance is, therefore, just that of restoring inns in order to make them *English* and *Christian* again. It is clear then, that something negative related to the English Imperialism had happened, and the inn, a highly symbolic place, and what it represents is subjected to a process of degradation.

The inn, a place which had already been used in *The Flying Inn*, is in Chesterton's imagination the symbol of good humour, of the small daily pleasures, once so appreciated by English people: the “merry old England” which, like the old inn, risk vanishing together with their good humour.

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. I. Boyd, Chesterton and Distributism, in *A Half Century of Views*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 283-290, p. 283-288.

<sup>132</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends*, in *The Poet and the Lunatics* [1929], Leipzig, Tauchnitz Edition, 1929, pp. 7-39, p. 12.

<sup>133</sup> *Ivi.*

But if in *The Flying Inn* Chesterton's polemical target, namely the cause of the inns' disappearance, was a cold, formal and conventional Puritanism, embodied by Lord Ivywood, in *this* collection of short stories the polemical target seems to be instead the landlords' greed. As the last short story will reveal, the desire to keep exploiting the workers will push the landlords to hatch a diabolical plot in order to prevent Gale hindering the systematic exploitation of the peasants.

We find in this beginning of the story the echoes of a battle that Chesterton will continue throughout his life both as a journalist and with his essays and novels. It is the controversy over an England which Chesterton does not recognize anymore and which he is no longer able to love. Chesterton starts this battle in favour of the new generations, so that they may live in an era of sincerity and of moral renewal, free of the Puritan mists and brutality of profit, of selfishness and the conventionalism of the bourgeois classes, which like the devouring plant of the introduction, may be stifling and bring down the structure of society.

In the development of the story the fundamental female character of the story enters the scene: during a walk Lady Diana Westertmaine, accompanied by his brother, reaches the inn. The two siblings are the new squires of the inn and of all the surrounded lands. They live in the nearby castle now somewhat in decline and are representative of a generous landed aristocracy, still tied to out-dated values, and absolutely incapable of entering into the dominant logic of the market. They are therefore the survivors of a class intended to be overwhelmed by capitalism.

Immediately between Gale and Lady Diana an intense feeling quickly grows very close, to the point that the poet begins to think that only the image of Lady Diana would be a suitable sign to revive that unfortunate place.

If this inn is the symbol of a sick England because stifled by the idolatry of profit, to raise the banner of love between a man and a woman could be the best symbol of renewal. In order to

better understand this concept, it might be useful to introduce Bachtin's notion of chronotope, which in his essay *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*, the Russian formalist defines in this way:

chiameremo *cronotopo* (il che significa letteralmente "tempospazio")  
l'interconnessione sostanziale dei rapporti temporali e spaziali dei quali la  
letteratura si è impadronita artisticamente.<sup>134</sup>

Time is dense and compact and becomes artistically visible. The inn, a place symbolic of conviviality, sociability and festivity, and the surrounding countryside carry the visible signs of decay to which History with a capital H, industrialization, capitalism, imperialism, have condemned modern English society. But in the development of the story the nostalgic yearning for an old chronotope, well-known in literature since ancient times, seems to gain ground: the chronotope of nature, the familiar-idyll chronotope (with at its centre the love story between Lady Diana and Gale) and even the country-idyll chronotope (in the representation of a countryside eventually repopulated by industrious peasants).

But this yearning is suddenly interrupted by the irruption of an entirely unexpected element in the story: the inn-keeper tries to hang himself, with the sign serving as a gallows, and it will only be thanks to Dr Garth's intervention that the worst is avoided.

The group seems somewhat confused at this point and somebody suggests calling the police but Gale, with a cool head that no-one would expect, proposes to have a conversation with the inn-keeper:

What you want is an unpractical man. That is what people always want in the last resort and the worst conditions. What can practical men do here? Waste their practical time in running after the poor fellow and cutting him down from one pub sign after another? [...] Can you persuade him to live? Believe me, that is

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<sup>134</sup> M. Bachtin, *Le forme del tempo e del cronotopo nel Romanzo*, In *Estetica e Romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1979, pp. 231-405, p. 231.

where we come in. A man must have his head in the clouds and his wits wool-gathering in fairyland, before he can do anything so practical as that.<sup>135</sup>

After twenty minutes of conversation Gale cheerfully announces that the unfortunate inn-keeper would not hang himself again. Then, under the astonished gaze of Lady Diana, he quietly begins to paint the celebrated sign that had been used as a scaffold; and Lady Diana “was of the sort not disinclined to dream herself back in some distant period [...] she felt herself back among the sacred arts and crafts of the medieval world.”<sup>136</sup> Gale’s effort appears, therefore, as a sacred deed, capable of bringing to life a very old, but glorious epoch: the Middle Ages.

At this point a clarification is necessary: in modern imagination, despite the attempts at re-evaluation made by the French historians of the *Annals*, Middle Ages is seen as a time of barbarism and decadence, located halfway between ancient lavishness and the Renaissance. For Chesterton, the defence of the Middle Ages, in which he engaged himself along with his friends Belloc and Father McNabb, had nothing nostalgic or traditionalist: it was a glance at the reality of institutions, lifestyles, social realities more in keeping than the modern ones with the truth and with man’s real needs. As Enrica Villari has recently pointed out:

la sua visione è dominata dall’Inghilterra ‘latina’ di Chaucer, partecipe dello spirito di un medioevo europeo non ancora turbato dalla riforma, quella ‘*allegra vecchia Inghilterra*’ che il puritanesimo arrivato dal mondo nordico offuscò per quasi un paio di secoli.<sup>137</sup>

It is evident therefore that the task of Gale is that of trying to retrieve the ‘Merry Old England’: he is a sort of sentinel against the increase of calculation, of commercialism which takes away

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<sup>135</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends* cit., p. 22.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 24.

<sup>137</sup> E. Villari, Bisogna poter contare su alcune certezze, in [http://www.lindiceonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=728:il-revival-editoriale-dellinventore-di-padre-brown&catid=39:segnali&Itemid=56](http://www.lindiceonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=728:il-revival-editoriale-dellinventore-di-padre-brown&catid=39:segnali&Itemid=56)

man's possibility to be happy. A difficult task, heroic in a certain way, worthy of an ancient sacred craft as that of a medieval knight.

### **3.2 Walt Whitman and the role of poetry**

In *The Poet and the Lunatic* a crucial role is assigned by Chesterton to poetry. But what kind of poetry? When Gale was fantasizing about portraying Lady Diana on the inn-sign, he followed her, forgetting to look after Hurrel, the lunatic of the story, behaving in this occasion like a sentinel who left his assigned post, driven by the force which "brought Troilus out of Troy and perhaps Adam out of Eden".<sup>138</sup> Gale here refers to two famous myths: one of classic origin but recurrent several times in the English literature (both from Chaucer and Shakespeare) and the other of Judeo-Christian origin. In both cases what has misled the protagonists of the two myths seems to be a passion for his beloved, the jealous desire to possess her. Is it not therefore the exaltation of love and of passion the aim which poetry intends to fulfil? What then? The answer to this question is in the subject of Gale's drawing.

On the sign of the inn *The Rising Sun* the poet-painter has drawn a dark face buried in a pair of hands with, behind it, a burst of golden light, the rising sun, that shines behind the head like a halo where between the clouds there is a red rooster. It is St. Peter:

the greatest of sinners and of saints; his reproach the cock, and his halo the  
Rising Sun.<sup>139</sup>

This image condenses in itself two images that are fully explained in Chesterton's other works. The first image, of the golden halo, comes from Walt Whitman, a poet immensely loved by Chesterton, and on which in 1929 he wrote a short essay, entitled *Is Humanism a Religion?* inserted in *The Thing*. In this essay Chesterton surprises us with these impressive words:

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<sup>138</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends* cit., p. 39.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 24.

my whole youth was filled, as with a *sunrise*, with the sanguine glow of Walt Withman.<sup>140</sup>

The sunrise or the rising sun, the same as the name of our inn. Whitman's poems are the expression of a radical trust in human energy and power and it is for this reason that Chesterton was so fond of him. In the essay he then adds:

what I saluted was a new equality, which was not a dull levelling but an enthusiastic lifting; a shouting exultation in the mere fact that men were men. Real men were greater than unreal gods, while he became as frank and comforting as a comrade. The point can be put most compactly in one of Whitman's own phrases; he says somewhere that old artists painted crowds, in which one head had a nimbus of gold-coloured light; "but I paint hundreds of heads, but paint no head without its nimbus of gold-coloured light." A glory was to cling about men as men.<sup>141</sup>

Whereas many poets have shown the value of one single man, with the expression "hundreds of heads, but paint no head without its nimbus of gold-coloured light" Whitman praises all men. But this image - says Chesterton - is actually very old: referring to the Byzantine' icons, he states that there are many pictures in which whole crowds are crowned with haloes, to indicate that they have all attained Beatitude.<sup>142</sup> Here we are reaching the root of the question, catching a reflection of Whitman's profound theological message:

for Catholics it is a fundamental dogma of the Faith that all human beings, without any exception whatever, were specially made, were shaped and pointed like shining arrows, for the end of hitting the mark of Beatitude.<sup>143</sup>

This is the central message of the poetry of which Gale is the spokesman, a mystical poem, which speaks of men, of all men, of saints and sinners, of their ability to achieve ecstasy.

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<sup>140</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Is Humanism a Religion?*, in *The Thing* [1929], Sheed & Ward, London, 1931, pp. 21-34, p. 23.

<sup>141</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Is Humanism a Religion?* cit., p. 23.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. G. K. Chesterton, *Is Humanism a Religion?* cit., p. 26.

<sup>143</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Is Humanism a Religion?* cit., p. 26.

The second image, that of St. Peter on the sign of the inn, inevitably reminds us of the image with which Chesterton's autobiography opens and closes. A man crossing a bridge who carries a key, the same image Chesterton had seen for the first time in his father's theatre:

I know that he who is called Pontifex, the Builder of the Bridge, is called also Claviger, the Bearer of the Key; and that such keys were given him to bind and loose when he was a poor fisher in a far province, beside a small and almost secret sea.<sup>144</sup>

The inn, image of the lost conviviality of the people of England, will return to its former glory if it recovers its deep and ancient relationship with Peter, the old fisherman of Galilee.

Moreover, it is interesting to notice that, as Gale reminds us, St Peter died by crucifixion upside down by his own choice:

I've often fancied his humility was rewarded by seeing in death the beautiful vision of his boyhood. He also saw the landscape as it really is: with the stars like flowers, and the clouds like hills, and all men hanging on the mercy of God.<sup>145</sup>

We have already found a similar image in the Father Brown short story *The Vanishing of Vaudrey*, written, after all, three years before (1926). In that occasion this image has been related to the last chapter of *Orthodoxy*, where Chesterton reminds the reader that the man, because of his original sin is born upside down, and therefore the common condition of man is not a wise or a reasonable condition; normality itself is abnormality. Nevertheless, if in Father Brown's case it was faith, here it is the poet-painter's wonderstruck gaze which is capable of putting things back into their proper perspective. But, here Gale adds an interesting observation:

The world is upside down. We're all upside down. We're all flies crawling on a ceiling, and it's an everlasting mercy that we don't drop off.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography cit.*, p. 336.

<sup>145</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 30.



That is Gale's version of Gabriel Syme's intuition in *The Man Who was Thursday*: we see only the back of the tapestry and so the threads do not come together to form a sharp image, the image is there, but it is on the other side. This world cannot find in itself its ultimate explanation, it needs something that can complete it: God with his mercy keeps the world in balance. The apparent extravagance of the poet is able to capture this element that goes beyond the facts and appearances.

### **3.3 Gabriel Gale: The Champion of the Lunatics**

In the following stories the character of Gale is specified thanks to the addition of some interesting details that all refer in some way to his distraction. This feature makes him very similar to a lunatic. For instance, in the second short story, *The Yellow Bird*, Gale is constantly distracted by the landscape. He stands observing the sky for hours and then remains enchanted by some details that eventually haunt him: a yellow bird in the midst of others, some colourful fish and so on. In *The Shadow of The Shark*, Gale is once again attracted by the detail of a starfish beside the corpse of a victim. He will meditate so long upon that starfish that he will reach the point of thinking he has been driven mad:

I told Wilkes that a flower was a living star, he said to himself. A starfish is more literally a living star. But this is like going crazy. And if there is one thing I strongly object to, it is going crazy. What use should I be to all my brother lunatics, if I once really lost my balance on the tight-rope over the abyss?<sup>147</sup>

Gale, therefore, sometimes seems to be insane; his attitudes and his utterances are like those of a lunatic, but then he always find the road to wisdom. In *The House of the Peacock* it is emphasized that Gale does not use any detective skills to solve the mysteries, neither any highly developed power of observation nor an acute intellect:

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<sup>147</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Shadow of The Shark*, in *The Poet and the Lunatics* cit., pp. 70-102, p. 88.

It would be truer to say of this man that he sometimes solved them by absence of mind.<sup>148</sup>

In the story, *The Purple Jewel*, Gale states that the reason why he coincidentally solved several mysteries is, “simply because [he is] mad, too, and often [does] it [himself].”<sup>149</sup> This theory will be stressed again at the end of the story, when Gale will succeed in solving the mystery of the vanishing of a celebrated playwright. The riddle is easily cleared up as Gale states:

because I think I should have done the same thing myself. It’s what some call having a sympathy with lunatics-including literary men.<sup>150</sup>

There, it is possible to find a similarity with the character of Father Brown: Gale in fact, is not lunatic, as the priest is not a criminal, but both of them have the capacity to deeply understand and cope with the tormented nature of both criminals and lunatics.

Also in the first short story *The Fantastic Friends* Gale performs a repertoire of queer acts, but then he explains to Lady Diana that he feels a great sympathy for the lunatics and therefore he knows how to manage them:

This poor fellow once did me a great service, and I feel I can only repay it by looking after him and saving him from the infernal brutality of officials. You see, the truth is they say I have a talent for it... a sort of psychological imagination. I generally know what they're going to do or fancy next. I've known a lot of them, one way or another... religious maniacs who thought they were divine or damned, or what not, and revolutionary maniacs, who believed in dynamite or doing without clothes; or philosophical lunatics, of whom I could tell you some tall stories, too... men who behaved as if they lived in another world and under different stars, as I suppose they did. But of all the maniacs I have tried to manage, the maddest of all maniacs was the man of business.<sup>151</sup>

But Chesterton in *The Poet and The Lunatics* teaches us something more. He brilliantly depicts two absolute characters the poet and the lunatic, who from the beginning are able to make the

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<sup>148</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The House of the Peacock*, in *The Poet and the Lunatics* cit., pp. 169-198, p. 170.

<sup>149</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Purple Jewel*, in *The Poet and The Lunatics* cit., pp. 199-237, p. 200.

<sup>150</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Purple Jewel* cit., p. 233.

<sup>151</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends* cit., pp. 37-38.

reader reflect. The poet in spite of his blank stare at things and the world, is the only person who is able to behold it in the right perspective. He is not an eccentric, he is centric, that is to say, he can see the centre, the direction to which all things are addressed, looking beyond appearances. To the efficient eyes of industrial society no difference is visible between the poet and the lunatic. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* reverses the question. The poet is not lunatic, but the rationalists and the intellectuals are:

Poets are commonly spoken of as psychologically unreliable [...] Facts and history utterly contradict this view. [...] Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom.<sup>152</sup>

It seems that according to Chesterton the lunatics are a major category in which it is possible to group all criminals: what we have termed ‘human’, idolaters, and even the philosophical murderers. The common denominator of these “lunatic murderers” is an excess of rationality, it is the madness of rationality and of business that makes them losing contact with reality. But luckily there is a mystical poet, Gabriel Gale, an apparently distracted and absent-minded man, who nevertheless is able to unravel incomprehensible mysteries and who driven by a sort of vocation, cannot help helping the lunatics to break out of the circle of their folly or at least to accompany them along the road of life, replacing their folly with his wisdom.

Yet, even though Gale can understand the lunatics precisely because there is in himself a part of this lunacy, yet there is a difference between Gale and absolute lunatics:

Perhaps you think I am as mad as he; and I have told you that I am at once like him and unlike him. I am like him because I also can go on the wild journeys of such wild minds, and have a sympathy with his love of liberty. I am unlike him because, thank God, I can generally find my way home again. *The lunatic is he who loses his way and cannot return.*<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p. 30.

<sup>153</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Yellow Birds*, in *The Poet and The Lunatics* cit., pp. 40-69, p. 67.

This mystic-poet cannot but make us think of a saint deeply loved by Chesterton: Francis of Bernardone, to whom in 1923 he dedicated a biography (*St. Francis of Assisi*). As is recalled in his biography, during his youth Francis was fond of Troubadours' love-poetry, but then, as the protagonist of the legend - "the Tumbler of Our Lady", because he turned head over heels and stood on his head before the image of the Blessed Virgin"<sup>154</sup> - he began to contemplate the world from a different perspective, becoming le jongleur de Dieu.

But when and where these deep changes take place inside him? Chesterton's answer is:

Francis, at the time or somewhere about the time when he disappeared into the prison or the dark cavern, underwent a reversal of a certain psychological kind; [...] he looked at the world as differently from other men as if he had come out of that dark hole walking on his hands. [...]

If St. Francis has seen, in one of his strange dreams, the town of Assisi upside down, it need not have differed in a single detail from itself except in being entirely the other way round. But the point is this: that whereas to the normal eye the large masonry of its walls or the massive foundations of its high citadel would make it seem safer and more permanent, the moment it was turned over the very same weight would make it seem more helpless and more in peril.[...]

St. Francis might love his little town as much as before, or more than before; but the nature of the love would be altered even in being increased. He might see and love every tile on the steep roofs or every bird on the battlements; but he would see them all in a new and divine light of eternal danger and dependence. Instead of being merely proud of his strong city because it could not be moved, he would be thankful to God Almighty that it had not been dropped; he would be thankful to God for not dropping the whole cosmos like a vast crystal to be shattered into falling stars.<sup>155</sup>

This is the same vision of Gale, of an upside down world begging for God's mercy, of an extravagant poet who seems to people sometimes foolish, as St. Francis, after his conversion:

Francis came forth from his cave of vision wearing the same word "fool" as a feather in his cap; as a crest or even a crown.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Le Jongleur de Dieu*, in *St. Francis of Assisi* [1923], Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1951, pp. 78-97, p. 81.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 83-88.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 87.

### **3.4 Different kinds of Lunatics**

Before concluding this chapter, as in the Father Brown stories we tried to highlight certain kinds of murderers Father Brown comes face to face with, so here as well we will try to describe the various types of lunatics who appear in these stories. Also in this case through a series of people who have lost their senses and come to commit murder, Chesterton intends to punish some intellectual and moral attitudes prevalent among his contemporaries.

In the long list of lunatics that Gabriel Gale comes face to face with, it is not hard to find Chesterton's common polemical targets (very well identified in the rest of the chapter of Orthodoxy entitled *The Maniac*). They are: the puritans, the fanatics of eastern religions, the supporters of absolute science, evolutionists, materialists, nihilists and so on, but more than any other, business people, the cold plutocrats who have transformed Britain into an imperial power and have concentrated ownership of the means of production in the hands of a select few. These lunatics, who are such because they make absolute what is instead a very partial view of reality and consider the world as empty, can even go as far as to kill, no longer having respect for man, his dignity, his rights. As Hurrell does, the lunatic of the first short story, first attempted to hang a modest inn-keeper, a representative of the humbler social classes, and then a ruined aristocrat, hanging both from the signboard of the inn. He is an ex-businessman, who, according to Gale, is the most difficult genre of madman.

The second kind of lunatic, in the story entitled *The Yellow Bird*, is a disturbed man who blew up a house with explosives. He had escaped in similar fashion from a terrible Russian jail where he had been imprisoned. This fact had filled him with a philosophy based on escape and emancipation, which turned him into a successful psychologist, especially with women. He had published a book called *The Psychology of Liberty* and he was working on a new book about the elimination of limits. Gale is becoming aware of his progressive insanity as he releases, firstly, a

yellow bird from its cage, making it prey to every bird of the woods nearby, and then shatters an aquarium, provoking the deaths of numerous goldfish. He is, therefore, a man very obsessed with limits, like many philosophers contemporary to Chesterton. He sees modernity as an ever-expanding circle aimed at breaking men free from the limitations imposed by previous generations. (It is not difficult to recognize in this philosopher's aspirations some aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy of the Superman). This kind of lunatics are people who cannot accept and stand the limit, and because of that they easily go mad and commit extravagant or terrible acts. But the poet instead, being, thanks to his job, accustomed to limit, imposed for instance by rhymes, words and verses makes the limit his strength.

That is why, to the image of the prison-circle, Gale contrasts that of an isosceles triangle. The poet sees in this irregular polygon his self-portrait, or rather that of his soul, well defined by some objective limits but that makes of him, however, what he really is. Being yourself is a limitation, but, Gale says, if we cease to be ourselves we also cease to be anything, like the Russian lunatic.

The Purple Jewel rather than speaking of madness is the story of a return to senses. This is a complex tale in which appears the theme, already presented by Pirandello in *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, of a man who pretends to be dead in order to give himself the chance of a second life. But unlike Mattia Pascal, who begins his new life by accident, with the discovery of a corpse which is mistakenly taken for his own body, the playwright Phineas Salt, the protagonist of Chesterton's story, plans everything around a particular journey with a highly symbolic destination. The playwright, a very famous man, whose sentimental life has been as eventful as that of Byron or D'Annunzio, after another break with his latest girlfriend and under the hallucinating influence of alcohol and absinthe, sets off on a reckless car ride with his old friend James Florence. He claims he wants to reach the high point to throw himself off but, being surrounded by the flat countryside of Kent, he stops the car once he sees the tall spires of Canterbury cathedral rising in

front of him. After trying in vain to enter the Cathedral to admire its beautiful stained glass, he begins to knock at the door of the Church, strongly recalling the famous scene of the killing of Thomas Becket: “King's men! King's men! Where is the traitor? We have come to kill the archbishop”.<sup>157</sup> At this point the playwright begins to address words of admiration and envy to the Saint buried in the cathedral:

Becket was really worth killing. He had lived, by God! He had really made the best of both worlds, in a bigger sense than they use the phrase for. Not both at once and both tamely, as the snobs do. But one at a time and both wildly and to the limit. He went clad in crimson and gold and gained laurels and overthrew great knights in tournaments; and then suddenly became a saint, giving his goods to the poor, fasting, dying a martyr. Ah, that is the right way to do it! The right way to live a Double Life!<sup>158</sup>

These are the last words his friend James Florence hears, because then Salt begins to climb the towers of the cathedral disappearing from his sight, and that of his friends and family, throwing them into the blackest despair for this mysterious vanishing. At the end of the story Gale will be able to discover that there was neither disappearance nor suicide. The playwright has simply decided to reach a nearby beach resort, and there, on the beach, changing his dress, he ceases to be the successful writer and puts on the clothes of his brother, a modest confectioner. During his recent visit to Canterbury, in fact, a sort of unconscious pilgrimage to the grave of Beckett, following in the steps of the happy characters of Chaucer's masterpiece, he opens his eyes and realizes that his previous life was unbearable:

The poet Phineas Salt was a man who had made himself master of everything, in a sort of frenzy of freedom and omnipotence. He had tried to feel everything, experience everything, imagine everything that could be or could not be. And he found, as all such men have found, that that illimitable liberty is itself a limit. It is like the circle, which is at once an eternity and a prison. He not only wanted to do everything. He wanted to be everybody. To the Pantheist God is everybody: to the Christian He is also somebody.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Purple Jewel* cit., p. 211.

<sup>158</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 234-235.

Even his artistic talent has been exhausted: a pantheist wants to be everyone and cannot write about anyone. He then makes a decision: to become embodied in a real human being and to start again leading the life of a living person, as a modest suburban shopkeeper, with a simple girl who is fond of religious works. Therefore, the ‘dandy’ life of this playwright at the mercy of his desires and his will to power, admired and envied by thousands, has turned into a modest existence, made up of “silly little lower middle-class things.”<sup>160</sup>

Pure madness, in the eyes of his solicitor and of many of his friends, “the story of The Man Who went Sane”<sup>161</sup> is in the eyes of Gale, the story of a man who knows not only that to rebel against the limits is folly and that the path to happiness goes through simplification and the acceptance of limits; but also the story of a poet who understands that the problem of poetry and art in general is the problem of the limit. Limit or shape is the reality of the real, its true nature. Shape defines identity, and identity is the precondition to existence and life. In embracing the limit, and the infinite that is inside it, is, then, the artist’s genius. Things, with their aura, speak to the poet and they say more than they say to the absent-minded man, because they speak of their inner significance, which is the infinite cross-reference to something that transcends them. The poet who seems so out of reality, since he half-lives in the fairy world, is, on the contrary, the only true realist: because the world of the fairies, the transcendent ground, is more real than reality.

In the last story, *The Asylum of Adventure*, Gale is dressed in mourning and is following a small funeral procession up to a small cemetery on the windy coast of Cornwall. This is the funeral of James Hurrell, to whom the poet was bound by a pact of deep gratitude. While Gale has finally won over Lady Diana Westermaine, with whom he had fallen in love in the first story, the narrator lets us know, thanks to a flashback, the origin of the strange friendship between the poet and the lunatic, providing information on Gale’s past. We learn that Gale, shortly after his

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<sup>160</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Purple Jewel* cit., p. 234.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 237.



eighteenth year, had inherited the income, and debts, of a country gentleman. But once he became a landlord, he departed radically from the conservative mentality of that environment. He, in fact, sympathized with gypsies and poachers, and more than once sent letters of complaint to the local newspaper, denouncing the harassments by some landlords towards their tenant farmers and the actions of magistrates who were always on the side of the rich. Not content with this reputation as a revolutionary and almost an anarchist, had decided to use his painting skills to cover the exterior walls of his house with portraits, in fact caricatures, of the landlords and magistrates who were guilty of questionable acts. This trait exasperated the landlords who, more powerful, had plotted against him. Gale, attracted by a stratagem to an inn, was confronted by two doctors, who were meant to declare him insane and have him interned in an asylum. But Gale realizes the deception and attacks the two corrupt doctors: Wolfe and Starkey. Suddenly a stranger enters, it turns out to be Hurrel, who orders the doctors to leave Gale and, in order to be more convincing, he extracts two guns, saying that he has stolen them from the office of the director of the asylum from which has just escaped. Gale, after having tied the two doctors up, can then escape into the woods along with the mad liberator.

In this short story, the theme of madness is handled differently in the figures of the two corrupt doctors: Wolfe and Starkey. The first appears to Gale as a man with a peculiar spiritual attitude: when he thinks of something he never thinks about the central point, but sees only “edges eaten away”<sup>162</sup>. If Gale is able to see in a cat something more than a cat, a tiger for example, Wolfe comes to think that it is less than a cat, “that it is a defective cat or a mentally deficient cat.”<sup>163</sup> The doctor is not able to grasp the essence of a thing. For him, nothing contains a central vein of absolute sanity. “There is no core to [his] cosmos. [His] trouble began with being an atheist.”<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Asylum of Adventure*, in *The Poet and The Lunatics* cit., pp. 238-272, p. 250.

<sup>163</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ivi.*

Starkey instead, has a rather different type of mental deficiency: he is a practical man accustomed to lie. Near reality there is always a lie, but Starkey's deficiency, as Gale states, consists in having forgotten what truth is. He is not a scientific thinker as Wolfe, he always picks up other men's ideas "as swiftly as a pickpocket."<sup>165</sup>

Gale, grateful to Hurrel for having restored his freedom, promised that he would always take care of him. For this reason, from that day the two began a peregrination around the country that lasted until, in a fit of rage, Hurrel tried twice to hang a man at the inn of the Rising Sun. Because of this serious incident Gale decided it was better to hide Hurrel in a small house of a remote Cornish village, tended by a butler. There Gale visited him often until, with his death, free from the vow, may declare his love to Lady Diana and celebrate her yes, by standing on his head and walking on his hands like a happy child in a playground.

### **3.5 A Last Consideration**

The Poet and the Lunatics marks in the bibliography of Chesterton a new polemic moment against English contemporary culture, its politics and its economy. In his eyes, his beloved country, born on the solid platform of Latin and Christian Europe, has derailed taking an unexpected direction. As Chesterton well explained in *A Brief History of England* there is a hidden side, forgotten in the history of his country: the false Anglo-Saxon origin of the English people, overlapped by historians of the nineteenth century, with a clever cultural operation, over the Roman and Christian past.

Parallel to this the aristocracy, on the one hand was the protagonist of the final rise of the parliament and the building of the empire, on the other hand it increasingly tied the fate of the country to Germany, contributing to the final separation of England from its Christian origins and

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<sup>165</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Asylum of Adventure* cit., p. 253.

leading it to become a capitalist and imperialist power. As we have already pointed out the vision that emerges from the whole work of Chesterton is dominated by the nostalgia for a Latin England as that of Chaucer, which share the spirit of a medieval Europe not yet troubled by the reform.

The Catholic faith, which he has painstakingly recovered at the end of a long inner personal journey, is for him the key that can open the doors to that glorious past world and able to make it live again, with an operation that according to Chesterton is not backward or conservative, but on the contrary, is the only form of possible progress. In this perspective the man of faith and the poet are substantially similar and overlapping, the faith (that of St. Francis) allows us to behold the truth of the world in the right way, reversing the perspective on things. Poetry is able to capture the auras around things and people, connecting them with their deepest truth, and circumscribing them in words, verses and stanzas. Moreover, poetry is not afraid of the limit which constitutes its essence, but can connect the limited word to its unlimited meaning: that which refers to God Creator. The poet then, looking at the cultural history of the past, as a great source of thought, could pull off an art capable of making the same impression on us that Gale made on Lady Diana:

The lady was of the sort not disinclined to dream herself back in some distant period, about which she did not know too much. She felt herself back among the sacred arts and crafts of the medieval world.<sup>166</sup>

The poet and the lunatic are, therefore, more than simple storytelling tools allowing the writer to reach narrative outcomes, these figures are like spotlights casting hued shadows, the deeper meanings looming behind the story and its protagonists.

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<sup>166</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Fantastic Friends* cit., p. 24.

#### **4. The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond**

In 1937, a year after Chesterton's death, a new collection of detective stories is posthumously published: *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* which constitutes his last work of fiction. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is Chesterton's most careless work, nevertheless it is not without admirers. Most notably J. L. Borges who, among all the Chesterton stories he translated into Spanish, chose as his favourite *The Three Horseman of the Apocalypse*, the first story of this collection.

In this collection Chesterton pays homage for the last time to the detective *genre* (so much loved and practiced by him) and to his most peculiar literary device, the paradox, which made him so popular that he earned for himself the epithet of "Prince of paradox". Chesterton, with his proverbial wit, had once stated, "the greatest mystery about almost any great writer is why he was ever allowed to write at all".<sup>167</sup> Chesterton suggests that the artist is simply part of something vaster: "in creative art the essence of a book exists before the book or before even the details or main features of the book".<sup>168</sup>

With this in mind, we can dare to say that this last work of fiction, or at least its idea, existed well before the work itself, at least since the days of his early works such as *The Defendant* (1901) or *Heretics* (1905), a collection of essays the first and of articles the latter, in which Chesterton, armed with all his cutting irony scrutinizes the most important figures of his time, and defends what good the bad of the world can offer, in open conflict with the mentality of the time, often using sharp paradoxes.

The paradox is the very engine of this collection, the idea at the heart of every single story, a sort of stage where some characters act in order to play out the hidden truth of the paradox. Among

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<sup>167</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Sketches by Boz*, in *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1911, pp. 1-12, p. 1.

<sup>168</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Pickwick Papers*, in *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* cit., pp. 13-25, p. 14.

such characters, a leading role is obviously attributed to Mr. Pond, a calm and slightly pedantic government official, who constitutes Chesterton's last amateur detective. It is well-known that the character of Father Brown was taken from Father John O'Connor, but who was the inspiration for Mr. Pond? In the first short story the narrator explains:

[Mr Pond] was a Government official who was an old friend of my father; and I fancy my infantile imagination had somehow mixed up the name of Mr. Pond with the pond in the garden. When one came to think of it, he was curiously like the pond in the garden. He was so quiet at all normal times, so neat in shape and so shiny, so to speak, in his ordinary reflections of earth and sky and the common daylight. And yet I knew there were some queer things in the pond in the garden. Once in hundred times, on one or two days during the whole year, the pond would look oddly different; or there would come a flitting shadow or a flash in its flat serenity; and a fish or a frog or some more grotesque creature would show itself to the sky. And I knew there were monsters in Mr. Pond also: monsters in his mind which rose only for a moment to the surface and sank again. They took the form of monstrous remarks, in the middle of all his mild and rational remarks. Some people thought he had suddenly gone mad in the midst of his sanest conversation. But even they had to admit that he must have suddenly gone sane again.<sup>169</sup>

Therefore he is a man who looks like a quiet pond, but which contains something eerie: monsters that surface only for a moment and then sink away again. They are the paradoxes, which under the shape of monstrous comments, insinuate themselves in the midst of Mr. Pond's calm and rational observations, and make people suspect he suffers from sudden insanity. But it is not so, he seems quickly sobered, and it is precisely the paradox stated by him that clarifies the mysteries, orders the chaos and makes reason triumph.

In the third short story of the collection *When Doctors Agree* Chesterton defines the meaning of paradox better: "truth standing on her head to attract attention". He then gives three examples of paradoxes of this sort, the first is: "The Golden Rule is that there is no Golden Rule" coined by his arch-enemy Mr. Bernard Shaw, the second is the celebrated: "I can resist everything except

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<sup>169</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Three Horsemen of Apocalypse*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*, London, Cassel and Company, [1937], pp. 3-31, pp. 3-4.

temptation” by Oscar Wilde and the last is his own quotation: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly”<sup>170</sup>, which appeared in 1910 in *What’s Wrong with the World*. These are all paradoxes mainly used by writers in order to strike their reader, “but Mr. Pond – as the narrator explains – belonged to a more polite world and his paradoxes were quite different. It was quite impossible to imagine Mr. Pond standing on his head. But it was quite as easy to imagine him standing on his head as to imagine him trying to attract attention.”<sup>171</sup> In the middle of a composed and sensible conversation suddenly two or three words apparently without sense appear, causing the interlocutor’s bewilderment. As Mr. Pond himself explains in *The Three Horsemen of Apocalypse*, it has nothing to do with a paradox, but it is the opening of an absolutely truthful story, “only, of course, you have to know the story to see how simple it is.”<sup>172</sup>

Given these preliminary remarks, these short stories might seem to lack the great theme touched by Chesterton in his principal works, that is to say the apology of Christianity and of the Roman Catholic Church. But it is not so, the paradox in fact makes us understand that truth is never what we see and that life has to be viewed from a different perspective. For this reason it is plausible to say that this work had already been in Chesterton’s mind for a considerable amount of time, to some extent indeed, the paradox has always been to him much more than a simple literary device, but rather a tool of knowledge and of prophecy, able to reveal the most impenetrable truths.

Therefore, before embarking on the analysis of the stories it might be useful to explain what Paolo Pegoraro defined as Chesterton’s theology of the paradox.

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<sup>170</sup> G. K Chesterton, *When Doctors Agree*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., pp. 71-98, p. 71

<sup>171</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ivi.*

#### **4.1 The Theology of the Paradox**

What has most fascinated Chesterton's multitude of readers is his fresh perspective on reality which is often proposed as a sort of 'somersault' of thought. If we look up the etymology of the word "paradox", we find that its Greek meaning (*parà-doxa*) is "conflicting with expectations", (*parà* = beyond and *doxa* = opinion). If *doxa*, as Socrates taught us, is the general opinion in relation to persons or things, the paradox is the reversal of this trend, and the temporary suspension of the usual way of judgment.

It is easy therefore to connect this idea with one of the most recurrent images of Chesterton's production: that of the upside-down man, who, standing on his head with his legs in the air, discovers the world for the first time only when he overturns his own daily vision of everyday life. But this special perspective is not a natural gift of the writer.

As Borges reminds us, GKC lived during the melancholic years he refers to with the term *fin de siècle*. He places Chesterton between Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka, portraying him as an author who feels a strong fascination for the nightmarish, "coinvolgendo il lettore nei brividi di un bosco pauroso, per poi finire però per ricondurlo per mano a casa, facendogli gustare tutta la soddisfazione e l'appagamento di una calda familiarità, ancora più preziosa dopo l'esperienza sfiorata dell'Unheimlich".<sup>173</sup>

Chesterton went through a nihilistic crisis, out of which he emerged thanks to the reading of two biblical books: the Book of Genesis and the Book of Job. Chesterton offers an original reading of the first. According to him original sin means an original dent in our world view. Chesterton writes in the introduction of *The Defendant*:

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<sup>173</sup> F. Canessa, *Chesterton, ovvero: come essere vivi senza essere morti*, in "The Chesterton Review", Edizione Italiana, Vol. I, No. 1, Agosto 2011, pp. 47-50, p. 48.

the great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not towards pride, but towards this weird humility. This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment [...] most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.<sup>174</sup>

It is the Book of Job which gives Chesterton the key to retrieve an outlook on the world lost in original sin. According to Chesterton, the genius of the book consists in not trying in any way to even remotely convince us about the ordinate goodness of creation, soothing our anxiety; but rather in showing that everything rests on a vast and mysterious irrationality. The God of Job does not answer opposing argument to argument, but it turns rationalism against Himself. Instead of self-justifying, God pushes questions to their extremes.

To Job divine grace appears not as a consolation, but as a blunder, a shock that upsets his vision of the world. The conclusion of Job, at the end of his troubled experience of illness is as follows:

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you”<sup>175</sup> The correct view of God and of the world, lost in the original fall, is so recovered. Therefore, Chesterton's conclusion is that God's riddles and uncertainties satisfy more than men's rational solutions, and that is why men are actually comforted by paradoxes:

It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not a picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it.<sup>176</sup>

So here again we understand the choice of the paradox, as an instrument, theologically founded, capable of activating a short circuit in the ‘corrupt’ worldview. The paradox renews the gaze, rekindles the desire to fathom reality, restarts the dynamism of the spirit immobilized by *doxa*,

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<sup>174</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction*, in *The Defendant* cit., pp. 1-7, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Book of Job*, 42:5

<sup>176</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *A Defence of Nonsense*, in *The Defendant* cit., pp. 42-50, p. 49.



the acquired knowledge and the commonplace. In other words, the paradox can return the *thàumatheïn*, that is to say, that sense of wonder when looking at the world, which, according to Plato and Aristotle, is the very foundation of philosophy.<sup>177</sup>

#### **4.2 The Three Horsemen of Apocalypse**

If the paradox is an instrument that can show reality from another perspective (the divine one), then the eight stories in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* are slices of reality and life, presented to us in a completely fresh perspective. The first of these stories, *The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, which Borges loved so much for the unforgettable images of a long white road, the white Hussars and white horses, is built in a wonderful way.

It starts from the paradox of two soldiers too obedient to carry out the orders they had. The story is set in the Prussia of Bismarck, at the time when the Prussian government oppressed the country of the Poles, during one of the many wars which devastated that part of the world. The road beloved by Borges joins, or perhaps separates as we will see later, the headquarters of the Prussian general command, held by Marshal Von Grock, head of the glorious regiment of the white Hussars, and the Polish city of Poznan, then part of the Prussian Reich, where a famous Polish poet-patriot defiantly lived, Paul Petrowski.

The road divides two different, and in some ways antithetical, worlds: on the one hand the granite Prussian militarism of Von Grock, a prosaic and practical man who knows that the Polish poet-patriot is a danger to the Prussian cause more than an entire army, and that therefore, he must be put to death. On the other hand, Paul Petrowski, a national poet and international singer.

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<sup>177</sup> Cf. P. Pegoraro, *Tra Genesi e Giobbe: Chesterton teologo del paradosso*, in “The Chesterton Review” cit., pp. 65-76, p. 71.

Endowed with a really beautiful voice, “he sang his own patriotic songs in half the concert halls of the world. At home, of course, he was a torch and trumpet of revolutionary hopes.”<sup>178</sup>

The story unfolds in an apparently linear way, but with a final twist. Van Grock sends a soldier to Poznan with orders to execute Petrowski. Shortly after, His Highness the Prince himself arrives unexpectedly at the headquarters, and, when learning of the order given by Grock, goes mad, fearing an international-diplomatic accident or a revolt of all the learned men of Europe, and instructs a faster rider to reach Poznan quicker than the other soldier in order to revoke the order of a death sentence.

In the meantime, and unbeknownst to the Prince, Von Grock has sent a third rider with the aim of stopping the second rider any way he can. When his sergeant comes back from Poznan with the news that Petrowski is alive, and the town is celebrating, a visit down the road reveals what had happened. The first rider, who carried the execution command, sensing the second rider hot on his heels, realized that he was carrying an opposite order to his own, and out of loyalty to his country, he shot him down. When the third horseman arrived, he killed the first rider from afar, believing he was the second.

Therefore no order had arrived in Poznan and the poet is safe. As an illustration of the paradox that an excess of obedience can prevent the soldiers from completing their mission, the story is extremely convincing. The paradox instead is never really convincing, but it expresses a profound truth and is connected to a theme that Chesterton had always been concerned with since his first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*: the theme of patriotism.

There is a healthy, and to some extent necessary, patriotism such as that of Petrowski and of all the Polish people, or of the Irish people, which Chesterton always stood up for (defending them

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<sup>178</sup> G. K Chesterton, *The Three Horsemen of Apocalypse* cit., p. 10.

with numerous writings filled with affection and esteem, as in *Irish Impressions*), or of the Boers, in favor of whom he engaged in a famous journalistic battle.

Their form of patriotism is a feeling of love for their own home, for their own people and for their own history, which allows them to draw on all the available resources, especially cultural ones, to defeat those who threaten their own independence. It is a creative patriotism, vital, which does not stifle individuals, quite the opposite, it bolsters them by giving them a strong sense of belonging.

Then there is a sick patriotism, dull and overbearing, that of Marshal Von Grock and of his soldiers, all sincerely devoted to their country, with such an iron discipline as to be indistinguishable from each other. It is a dangerous nationalism, because it puts the interest of the state before that of individuals, and does not hesitate to use force to glorify its empire even at the expense of the rights of other nations. It is known that Chesterton did not like German imperialism at all, which he had openly criticized at the time of the first World War in his book: *The Barbarism of Berlin*. Now, shortly before his death, he returns in an almost prophetic way on this subject with this story featuring the spread of Nazi militarism in Germany.

He did not like even British imperialism which he considered a brainchild of high finance, an institution he believed to be contrary to the interests of the English people. These beliefs led him to condemn the position of England during the Boer War and to oppose Kipling's imperialism, but also to violently side in favor of the independence of Ireland. Convictions that will soon be taken up by men willing to take action. After all, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* inspired Michael Collins to lead the Irish to victory against British domination; an essay of Chesterton's which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* inspired Mohandas Gandhi to lead the movement that would put an end to British colonial rule in India. In the wave of this trend in which Chesterton is seen as the ideal father of the independence of many nations, Dale Ahlquist, president of *The*

*American Chesterton Society*, in a review of *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*, goes further. In Paul Petrowski, the Polish poet in Chesterton's story, he sees the prophecy of a great poet from Cracow:

A generation after this story was written, there would arise a poet from Cracow, who would become an international figure and "a torch and trumpet of revolutionary hopes." He, too, would occupy the chair of Petrow, or Peter. And his enemies would try to kill him. And they would fail. What did Chesterton see with his bright dying eyes?<sup>179</sup>

### **4.3 Mr. Pond between Shakespeare and Dickens**

In Mr. Pond's stories the same rhetorical procedure keep repeating: Pond, while conversing with his interlocutors, Sir Hubert Wotton, a famous diplomat and colleague in the ministry, and Captain Gahagan, a gigantic young Irishman, suddenly slips an incomprehensible paradox in the midst of otherwise straightforward sentences, and in order to explain it, a new story is told. The reader thus comes to know the story of three women who "go so fast that they get no farther"<sup>180</sup> or of two doctors "who came to agree so completely that one of them naturally murdered the other"<sup>181</sup>, or even about "a relatively red pencil [...] [which] made black marks"<sup>182</sup>. This last paradox is the cue for one of the most complex stories of the collection entitled: *Pond the Pantaloon*.

It is a story worthy of a modern spy story told with devilish inspiration and influenced by the climate of tension Europe was experiencing at the time, on the eve of the Second World War. A hostile dictatorship (presumably Germany) has hatched a conspiracy to provoke a *coup d'état* in the United Kingdom, being able to bribe a certain number of British officials. Pond and Wotton

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<sup>179</sup> D. Ahlquist, *Lecture 74: The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*, <http://www.chesterton.org/discover-chesterton/chesterton-101/lecture-74/>

<sup>180</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Crime of Capitan Gahagan*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., pp. 67-82 , p. 71.

<sup>181</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *When Doctors Agree*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., pp. 83-104, p. 93.

<sup>182</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Pond The Pantaloon*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., pp. 105-124, p. 116.

are tasked with overseeing the postal transfer of some precious documents in the case of silver fir, to avoid them falling into enemy hands. In doing this they are helped by a Scotland Yard agent, Dyer, who will turn out to be a spy. Pond will discover him deleting the address from the box of documents and writing a new one. The instrument used for this is a fireplace poker, which, when properly heated is the famous “relatively red” pencil which traces black marks. What is most surprising in this story, and also in the following ones, is the complex web of literary quotations Chesterton wisely uses to weave a unique semantic network that is superimposed on the original plot:

“I may resemble Polonius,” said Pond, modestly; and, indeed, his old-fashioned beard, owlish expression and official courtliness made the comparison almost apt. “I may be like Polonius; but I am not Polonius - which is just the point I wish to illustrate”.<sup>183</sup>

Polonius, it must be remembered, is the senior advisor of the state of Denmark, commissioned by king Claudius to demonstrate the madness of Hamlet. He is always characterized as an old man, dispensing pedantic advice and masterminding Machiavellian machinations.

It is easy therefore, to understand that this self-accusation of Pond as Polonius, requires a self-defense, and an explanation too. What makes Pond like Polonius? Beyond physical appearance, perhaps the act of sniffing out which deranged official is somehow conspiring against the interests of the state. And it is interesting to note that when he manages to unmask the Scotland Yard agent at the end of the story, he will use these words: “Don't you see that he locked himself into a logical prison, when he would empty and close the whole station, to impress us with his efficiency.”<sup>184</sup> We now know that for Chesterton logic and efficiency are synonymous with insanity. So Pond-Polonio was able to unmask the real fool that threatened the country's interests.

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<sup>183</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Pond The Pantaloon* cit., , p. 108.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 121.

However, Polonius is a tragic character, who dies by Hamlet's hand, through a misunderstanding, and who fatefully causes the death his daughter Ophelia. Pond, instead, turns out to be a character from a much lighter literary genre which Chesterton mixes with the above-mentioned tragedy: he is the Pantaloon of the *commedia dell'arte* or rather of the typical Christmas pantomime in which the protagonist is Pantaloon, the clown who hits the policeman with a poker. But what allows Chesterton to make this sharp narrative switch from tragedy to pantomime? It is a detail that has intentionally been left out so far: the narrated events happen exactly on Christmas Day. And so, under a thick blanket of snow, by a cosy hearth with a roaring fire, "our dismal *salle d'attente* will soon be a parody of Father Christmas's cottage in a pantomime".<sup>185</sup> This sudden Christmas metamorphosis, reminds us of the author that Chesterton considered consubstantial to Christmas: Dickens. To better clarify what Chesterton has tried to do in this story, his commentary on Dickens' Christmas Books comes to our aid.

There, Chesterton points out how the writings of Dickens, ultimately, aim to describe happiness. This is why he so often speaks of Christmas. This festivity contains in fact three elements which are also aspects of happiness: 1) The first component is the dramatic quality: happiness is not a condition, it is a conjuncture. Indeed, it is something that comes suddenly, after a period of uncertainty, taking us by surprise. 2) The second element is the fact that Christmas is a winter celebration. This is not an element of contrast, but of antagonism. A great happiness is better appreciated when the entire material universe is saddest. 3) The third fundamental element of Christmas is the grotesque, the natural expression of joy. Goblins are grotesque, as are the spirits of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, embodiments of the wildly generous spirit of Christmas.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Pond The Pantaloon* cit., p. 123.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. G. K. Chesterton, *Christmas Carol*, in *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* cit., pp. 105-123, p. 107-108.

By analyzing the atmosphere of *Pond the Pantaloon* we find evidence of all the three elements mentioned. The attempted *coup d'état* makes the early atmosphere tense and dramatic, to the point that Pond feels he is a character of a Shakespearean tragedy. But the solution of the problem comes unexpectedly, with a twist that moves this story away from the classical scheme of detective fiction: a man going around the barrier at the station is able to reach the shelter of the track and deflects the gun of the Scotland Yard agent, which otherwise would have hit Pond.

This story owes much of its joy to the second point, that is to say the winter atmosphere, the bleak waiting room, where Pond and Wotton had sadly to spend the Christmas Day, comes alive when everything around them becomes white and pure. At this point the fireplace, so important in the plot of this story, becomes an element of joy and comfort. But it is definitely the third point, the presence of the grotesque, that turns this detective story into a happy farce: the man who saved Pond, threading his way through the station, evading all the surveillance, later will be revealed to be an amateur clown, wearing, under his threadbare overcoat, his stage outfit. The Pantomime now is complete: in addition to Pond-Pantaloon, we have the clown, the poker and the policeman.

Chesterton looks at the literature of the past, of which he had an extraordinary knowledge, as an endless repertoire from which he liberally draws quotes and comparisons. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* allows him to stage a potentially tragic situation which the metaphysics of the paradox will be able to transform into a pantomime.

Without explicitly evoking the Christian faith, Chesterton opens our eyes to a new reality, Pond is not Polonius, in the sense that he does not share his meanness, but he lives likewise in a dark abode of death: the palace of Elsinore or, not metaphorically speaking, the Great Britain of the twentieth century, against whose ruling class Chesterton harboured more than slight mistrust. But

the dark conspiracies of this house of death are thwarted, almost by accident, by a happy clown who happens to be there by chance.

At the end of the story Captain Gahagan, namely the person to whom the story had been told by Wotton and Pond, leaves us with this comment:

My favourite character in your drama is the Clown. He is so irrelevant. I am like that myself. I am so irrelevant.[...] He is like the Clown in Shakespeare. [...] The Clown in Shakespeare seems to be there by accident unconnected with the story and yet he is the chorus of the tragedy. The Fool is like a fantastic dancing flame lighting up the features and furniture of the dark house of death. Perhaps we may connect Pond and Polonius after all.<sup>187</sup>

#### **4.4 A Gigantic Irishman**

In the last stories the other two characters, who are however present in all the stories gradually take on a more defined shape: Sir Hubert Wotton, a famous diplomat, Pond's colleague in the Ministry, with a similarly calm personality, which Chesterton describes as "gray", and Captain Gahagan, a young, gigantic Irishman with an unpredictable attitude, who "seemed to come out of an older period of dandies and duellists".<sup>188</sup> Pond's two friends, beyond being his puzzled listeners, also play a narrative role comparable to that of the young people in the frame of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In fact, every story has a sort of frame in which the three characters expatiate on various issues, before one of them, mostly Pond, but in two cases Gahagan himself, begins to reveal the subject of the story, becoming in this way a second-degree narrator. Wotton only adds some details of adventures shared with Pond, or asks questions to his friends.

Between the time when the three friends meet and the one in which the events are narrated in the second-degree narrative there is always a chronological *décalage*, which in some cases is even about twenty or thirty years.

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<sup>187</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Pond the Pantaloon* cit., p. 117.

<sup>188</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse* cit., p. 12.



This aspect makes these detective stories very peculiar. In them, the final solution of the riddle is somehow anticipated, though in a roundabout way, by the initial paradox which at the same time makes of the characters individuals outside time, whose experiences are particularly close to readers of all times.

By strictly analyzing the three main characters, it can be noted that while Pond and Wotton are two static characters, essentially identical in all the stories, Gahagan is a dynamic character, who could be said to grow and mature in the course of the stories. This feature distinguishes him from most fictional characters in Chesterton, which a part of literary criticism has always described as flat characters, often mere embodiments of ideology or particular points of view. Gahagan instead is a gigantic Irishman, a braggart, who is able to tell clearly improbable stories and who is a close relative of the other great Irishman created by Chesterton: Captain Patrick Dalroy of *The Flying Inn*. A man who, referring to the quote above, chose the role of the clown of Shakespeare. Not only narrative needs make Gahagan completely out of place (for he is the privileged listener of Pond's tales). In the development of the collection Gahagan as a listener becomes somehow the protagonist. With his loud laugh that fills every room and his eccentric, if not downright insane, bearing, "è come una fantastica fiamma crepitante che illumina i lineamenti e il mobilio dell'oscura dimora di morte". This self-description needs an explanation. Gahagan, in fact, who at the beginning of the collection is a confirmed bachelor, always surrounded by beautiful women, will be twice (wrongly) accused of murder, on account of his jealousy towards a potential rival in love. It will obviously be Pond the character who clears him both times.

In the story *Ring of Lovers*, Gahagan is invited to an unusual dinner by Lord Crome along with many other young handsome people. He will subsequently understand that it is a trap to unmask Lady Crome's secret lover, set by her husband, that will end with the lover choked to death.

In this story, which Chesterton weaves by mingling elements from a Berkely Cox detective book and a *feuilleton*, Gahagan will be shocked not only by the brutality of the fact, but also at being suspected of being a potential lover of a married woman. This situation will lead him to a major overhaul of his life:

that particular morning, swept clear and shining after the storm, Captain Gahagan came out of the church in the little by-street and very cheerfully took the road to the house of the Varney family, where he found Miss Joan Varney pottering about in the garden with a spud, and told her several things of some importance to both of them.<sup>189</sup>

The confession, easing his conscience, allowed him to make the resolution that had been simmering in his heart for a long time: to stop fooling around and get engaged to a respectable girl.

In the next story *The Terrible Troubadour*, set a few years earlier during the Great War, Gahagan, during a leave, seduces a girl, the daughter of a Reverend, and then is accused by the Reverend himself of killing his neighbour, Ayres, a painter who was likewise in love with the girl. The truth is that the Reverend believed, in good faith, he had seen Gahagan shoot the painter, while instead he had shot a chimpanzee who was trying to climb up on his daughter's balcony. This time Chesterton enjoys mixing the romanticism of *Romeo and Juliet* and the ghostly and nightmarish atmosphere of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Poe. The paradox that gives rise to this story, ("in nature you must go very low to find things that go so high"<sup>190</sup>) can be interpreted in two ways, on the one hand it refers in a Darwinian way to the chimpanzee, a creature further down in the evolutionary ladder than the human being. It had been drugged and sent by Dr. Green, a lame evolutionary botanist, also in love with the daughter of the Reverend, mad with jealousy, to show that even an inferior being like a monkey was able to climb the

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<sup>189</sup> G. K. Chesterton, Ring of Lovers, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., p. 136.

<sup>190</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Terrible Troubadour*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., p. 156.

balcony as Gahagan and the painter had done. But the deeper meaning of the aphorism is that one in relation to Gahagan himself. He literally has the experience of going very low down, to make a *kenosis*<sup>191</sup>, he recognized himself as a seducer of honest young girls and as a man devoid of morality and of courage. The recipient of this confession in this case is his girlfriend. The falling so low down will allow him to make a decision that will take him far above: the decision to marry.

With the evolution of this character, this collection of short stories goes beyond the historical situation in which it was written and becomes a reflection on the meaning of life. We cannot miss mentioning that Gahagan for his massive physique reminds us of Chesterton, who was six feet and four inches tall and weighed 21 stones. The similarities do not stop at physical immensity. Gahagan, despite never having written anything, was still a creative inventor of stories, idle tales that nevertheless possess a very literary style. Such as that contained in the frame of the last story, coincidentally entitled *A Tall Story* which, for its magical realism, recalls some pages of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or the collection of the *Italian Folktales* (1956) by Italo Calvino. The story is about a man too tall to be seen. The paradox refers to an acrobat who performs a murder using some stilts (this is also a tale of espionage in which we breathe the heavy atmosphere caused by the advance of Nazi militarism in Germany and which turns towards the solution of the pantomime), but it is also appropriate to the little story told by Gahagan, whose main character is a titan: Anakin, son of Anak, buried alive by Jupiter and accidentally found by a couple of Gahagan's friends, while unwittingly mowing their lawn in Muswell Hill. In order to be able to exhume the monster, their mansion is utterly devastated, as though an earthquake had struck.

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<sup>191</sup> A greek word which means a path of conversion, lit. 'emptying', etimol. Obscure. (theol.) action of the Saviour in humbling Himself by becoming Man and accepting human limitations. Cf. Wyld H. C., *The Universal Dictionary of The English Language*, London, Herbert Joseph Ltd., 1936.

Once pulled out, the titan was so tall that his head was a tiny dot in the distance. The giant had, however, some special features and a destiny that rings a bell:

It was impossible to discern or recall one feature of that old familiar face. He strode away; and fortunately decided to walk across the Atlantic, where even he was apparently submerged. It is believed that the unfortunate creature was going to give lectures in America; driven by that mysterious instinct which leads any person who is notorious for any reason to adopt that course.<sup>192</sup>

The Titan has a familiar face, his portrait bears a striking resemblance to the self-portraits that Chesterton made of himself: a small head on a huge body, and the fact that the monster has done a series of lectures in America, evidently alludes to Chesterton himself who, like the buried Anakin, suffered perhaps of invisibility in England and had to seek a more interested audience in America.

Returning to Gahagan, he belongs to an incredible array of irresistible Irish characters that Chesterton, although not Irish, created: the unforgettable Patrick Dalroy of *The Flying Inn*, Michael Moon of *Manalive*, to name just two. Moreover, we must not forget that the model of Father Brown was father John O'Connor, a happy son of Ireland, who took Chesterton with his intelligence and his kindness to the True Faith. We could say therefore that Father Brown has, to some extent, an Irish father. Chesterton loved the Irish so much that he championed them and their independence, without sparing his own country harsh and heartfelt criticism. One of the most famous aphorisms of Chesterton is indeed dedicated to them:

the great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad. For all their wars are merry, and all their songs are sad.<sup>193</sup>

Chesterton considered the British and the Irish as two distinct nations, even though they shared Celtic origins. As he explained in his essay *A Short History of England*, official English

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<sup>192</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *A Tall Story*, in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* cit., p. 187.

<sup>193</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *A Short Story of England*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1929, p. 103.

historiography has always tended to completely diminish this Celtic origin, then Romanized and Christianized, in favor of the Anglo-Saxon one, the German one. In the Irish Chesterton identified therefore a soul that the British had lost, made of a more hilarious joy, a more shattering and alcoholic corporality, a less inhibited sexuality, a greater sincerity regarding their weaknesses, all aspects that had allowed the sons of the Emerald Isle to keep themselves Christian and Catholic, unlike the British.

The Celts are sometimes a bit extravagant, capable of excessive gestures, such as the deeds of the swashbuckler Patrick Dalroy, but also able to tenaciously resist against enemies, both literary as the Islaming prohibitionists of *The Flying Inn*, and historical, that is to say the English themselves.

Gahagan himself is a soldier as well, a captain who has even received military decorations during the First World War.

But his greatest battle, very similar to the one fought by Chesterton himself, was that of fighting back a snobbish and decadent vision of existence that would make him a dandy, or the dryness of nihilism and of skepticism that could turn him into a suicide or murderer adulterer, as one of the many villains of these stories. Against these enemies Gahagan, like Chesterton, fought with the weapons of laughter and optimism, which happily lead him, with the help of the Church, to take the most important decision of his life: to settle down and get married.

Around Gahagan and Chesterton, as around all the men of the last century, a culture of death, made of nihilism, had developed, dragging the whole of humanity into a terrible war, but their sound laugh was that flame that had the power to illuminate the dark dwelling of death, as the laughs of the fools in Shakespeare's tragedies.

The road travelled by this Irishman in his journey back home to the faith and to the profound joy of marriage is, then, similar to that of Innocent Smith, another fool who has been around the world for the great adventure of returning back home.

## **Conclusion: The Gigantic Secret of Chesterton**

This dissertation has sought to achieve one particular aim: to analyse some of Chesterton's detective story collections, on the assumption that this narrative *genre* was the closest to his intellectual approach to the mystery of life. Not only did he, in fact, write detective books, he also gave a detective quality to his autobiography and to his theological vision of existence. As he states in *Orthodoxy*:

to a Christian existence is a *story*, which may end up in any way. In a thrilling novel (that purely Christian product) the hero is not eaten by cannibals; but it is essential to the existence of the thrill that he *might* be eaten by cannibals. The hero must (so to speak) be an eatable hero. So in Christian morals, in short, it is wicked to call a man "damned": but it is strictly religious and philosophic to call him damnable. All Christianity concentrates on the man at the crossroads.<sup>194</sup>

According to Chesterton, then, detective fiction, and popular fiction in general, has much in common with the Christian vision of life, because the hero, like the man, in any moment can be lost because of the original Fall of man or can be saved thanks to his free will. In addition to this, detective fiction is suitable for the complexity of human existence for another reason: it also revolves around the presence of a mystery and, unable to ignore it, itches to unravel it.

This characteristic is very much in line with Chesterton's intellectual attitude, which in the introduction of this dissertation, borrowing a definition from Casotto, has been defined as "the chaotic theory of knowledge"<sup>195</sup>. It essentially consists in seeing the surrounding world suddenly crammed with evidence, traces of different sorts and nature all pointing to the same direction, a spot outside our field of vision, but which exists, because only it, is able to explain our existence. It is clear therefore why the preference for detective fiction in Chesterton increases together with his growing Christian faith. In fact, his first collection of detective stories, *The Club of the Queer*

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<sup>194</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., pp. 203-204.

<sup>195</sup> Cf. Introduction of this dissertation, p. 3.

*Trades* (1905), appeared in the same year as *Heretics*, the essay with which Chesterton distances himself from the major contemporary ideologies and openly approaches Christianity.

Then, in 1908 *The Man Who Was Thursday* was published. His best-known novel which, even though it cannot be entirely attributed to the detective genre, it is undoubtedly centered on a tangled web of mysteries, the greatest of which is “the monstrous pantomime ogre who was called Sunday”. Critics and readers of all ages have indulged in identifying Sunday with God, with the devil and in other various ways. Chesterton himself in his autobiography gives us his version: the whole story is a nightmare of things, not as they are, but as they seemed to the young half-pessimist of the ‘90s”.<sup>196</sup>

The novel is dated 1908, but in the *Autobiography* Chesterton tells us that it refers to his 'nightmare', (which is also the subtitle of the novel), the dark period he had lived through since 1893. In that year, we can say that his happy youth ends, all his friends go away to college and he, in the solitude of the art school he had chosen, aided by the decadent atmosphere of the time, plunges into a dark pessimism and begins to stare into the abyss of nihilism. With a modern term we can say that he was depressed. On the origin of this crisis some lines of the biography written by Maisie Ward, are enlightening:

When all Gilbert’s friends were at Oxford or Cambridge, he used to say how glad he was that his own choice had been a different one. He never sighed for Oxford. He never regretted his rather curious experiences at an Art School—two Art Schools really, although he only talks of one in the *Autobiography*, for he was for a short time at a School of Art in St. John's Wood (Calderon's, Lawrence Solomon thought), whence he passed to the Slade School. He was there from 1892 to 1895 and during part of that time he attended lectures on English Literature at University College.

The chapter on the experiences of the next two years is called in the *Autobiography*, “How to be a Lunatic,” and there is no doubt that these years were crucial and at times crucifying in Gilbert's life. During a happily prolonged youth (he was now eighteen and a half) he had developed very slowly, but normally. Surrounded by pleasant friendships and home influences he had never really become aware of evil. Now it broke upon him suddenly—probably to a

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196 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 105.



degree exaggerated by his strong imagination and distorted by the fact that he was undergoing physical changes usually belonging to an earlier age. Towards the end of his school life Gilbert's voice had not yet broken. His mother took him to a doctor to be overhauled and was told that his brain was the largest and most sensitive the doctor had ever seen. "A genius or an idiot" was his verdict on the probabilities. Above all things she was told to avoid for him any sort of shock. Physically, mentally, spiritually he was on a very large scale and probably for that reason of a slow rate of development. The most highly differentiated organisms are the slowest to mature, and without question Gilbert did mature very late. He was now passing through the stage described by Keats: "The imagination of a boy is healthy and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between"—a period unhealthy or at least ill-focused."<sup>197</sup>

Chesterton himself confesses in his autobiography: "I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging in deeper and deeper as in a blind spiritual suicide."<sup>198</sup> And again: "I was still oppressed with the metaphysical nightmare of negations about mind and matter, with the morbid imagery of evil, with the burden of my own mysterious brain and body."<sup>199</sup> These words give rise to the suspicion that his terrible adolescent crisis was somehow linked to the mystery of his body, which, if in adulthood reached six feet and four inches and a weight of approximately 336 pounds, when 19 years old was already a considerable size and must have stuck out among his peers; he probably resembled the monstrous character, Sunday. This character, indeed, is often described as a gigantic being and those who stare at him have the impression of beholding the whole world. Syme himself, the protagonist of the novel, towards the end of the book describes him as follows:

Anch'io mi accorgo di pensare di lui quello che penso del mondo intero. [...] Quando vidi la sua schiena, capii che era l'uomo più cattivo del mondo[...] Guardandolo di fronte seppi che era un Dio". "Pan" disse il professore con aria sognante "Era un Dio e una bestia"<sup>200</sup>.

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<sup>197</sup> M. Ward, *Art Schools and University College*, in Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Sheed & Ward, London, 1944, pp. 43-55, p. 43.

<sup>198</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 98.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 105.

<sup>200</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* cit., p.

And in the *Autobiography* the explanation sounds even more explicit:

the ogre who appears brutal but is also cryptically benevolent is not so much God, in the sense of religion or irreligion, but rather Nature as it appears to the pantheist, whose pantheism is struggling out of pessimism.<sup>201</sup>

If, therefore, Sunday refers to a phase in which Chesterton declares himself a pantheist, frightened by mixing the nature of good with evil, it is striking to notice that he gives this character features that recall his own.

The aim here is not that of entering into a psychological analysis of the deep motivation for this mechanism, but it is undeniable that in the light of modern psychology, the crisis experienced by the young Chesterton was somewhat similar to that of many teenagers in any age.

As any developmental psychology manual teaches, the perception of our physical transformations has immediate effects on a psychological level: during adolescence, we witness our body image changing and that involves questioning our personal identity.<sup>202</sup> It is as if the teenager experience on an individual level the secular dilemma of philosophy: the body-mind dualism. The intense struggle of the adolescent is focussed on the outcome of this dichotomy, to create unity between *psyche* and *soma*. The outcome of this effort can be different: either the unification of one's person in a process of maturation, or the conflict, visible or recondite, with one's body that will last into the future. To regain possession of one's transformed body and then integrate it into the bodily identity, it would be necessary for the adolescent to mourn for the loss of their childhood body. The body of the child, in fact, mentally, dies to make room for a completely different physique and is therefore disturbing.

Considering that the excessive size of his body will lead Chesterton in the course of his life to have various and serious health problems, it is understandable that this problematic relationship

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201 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., pp. 105-106.

202 Cf. R. Martinelli, *L'identità personale nell'adolescente*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1975, p. 5.

between body and mind (a huge body, but a mind as great intellectually) is somewhat important, not only on an existential level but also through the deep structures of the unconscious, on the creative level. It is as if, because of his cumbersome adult body, the writer forever mourn his childhood, and with it the period of intense happiness it had given him. The fact that Chesterton declared that during his crisis he got closer to pantheistic philosophy and had some experiences of a spiritualist kind, might lead us to suppose that he, in a moment of weakness of his personality, had experienced some crisis of depersonalization<sup>203</sup>, an experience not necessarily pathological and rather frequent in adolescence.

Among the experiences of depersonalization, there is also one labelled with the name of ecstasy, in which the subject, momentarily losing consciousness of himself, feels confused with nature, with God, and is overcome with elation and the joy of supernatural forces. Chesterton describes his state of mind in that year as follows:

At this time I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad.”<sup>204</sup>

Therefore Sunday would be the expression of the horror, of the nightmare that Chesterton experienced, at the center of which there was the return of a typical belief of early childhood: a total identification between the self and the surrounding world and a belief in the magic and demonic supernatural.

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203 Con depersonalizzazione si intendono una serie di sintomi, talvolta leggeri, talaltra patologici, di indebolimento e cambiamento della propria coscienza organica e affettiva. Ci si può sentire insensibili fisicamente e moralmente, senza volontà propria come degli automi. Nello stesso tempo è alterata la nozione del mondo esteriore. L'aspetto delle cose e dei fatti è dichiarato strano, irreali; i fatti hanno un significato particolare, una relazione con il destino del soggetto che influenzano. Inversamente egli sente gli avvenimenti esteriori legati al proprio pensiero e alla propria volontà, agisce su di essi e si identifica con essi. Cf. P. Guillaume, *Manuale di psicologia*, Firenze, Giunti, 1972, p. 249.

204 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 97.

His move toward the Christian faith will allow Chesterton to untangle himself from this confusion and to answer the typical question of adolescence, "*Who am I?*", by strengthening his weakened identity. More precisely, our author tells us that a particular aspect of Christian doctrine had an extraordinary effect on him: "the dogmatic insistence that God was personal, and had made a world separate from Himself"<sup>205</sup>, the exact opposite of that pantheism which frightened him so much.

This transformation is not only appreciable in his life, in his autobiography and in the works and essays, but also in his detective stories. The nightmare disappears to make way to a new scene which has been analyzed throughout this dissertation.

We have seen that, as in any detective book, the story begins with a calm and tranquil situation, sometimes of conviviality (especially in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*) or of idyllic contact with nature (in *The poet and the Lunatics* and in *The Father Brown Stories*) into which a crime suddenly breaks, obviously disturbing the initial tranquillity. It then emerges that it is the product of the action of an individual who falls into the large category Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* called lunatic, not in the proper sense of the word, but as a logic man, sometimes even successful, but with the narrowest spiritual horizons. A man, sometimes materialistic, sometimes fanatically religious, who has made one aspect of existence absolute, losing sight of the sacredness of life.

But, on the crime scene other characters soon appear: Father Brown and Mr. Pond. These are two men who share some similar traits: they are both two people no longer youthful, rather small in stature, almost asexual, with a modest appearance which hides however a great strength of character and out-of-the-ordinary clear thinking. This rationality, however, is far away from that of the traditional investigator, à la Sherlock Holmes. On the contrary, it is expressed through arguments and speeches that may seem puzzling. As we know it is faith in Father Brown, and the

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<sup>205</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p. 119.

paradox in Mr. Pond, a rhetoric variant of faith, which allow the two amateur detectives that clarity of vision, or rather that reversal of perspective, which inevitably leads them to unravel the mystery.

In addition to these characters with a small body and a large brain, other two characters appear: Flambeau and Gahagan, both with a towering physique, lively, virile and both gifted with a particular form of creative madness that is translated into a variety of ways: Flambeau is the artist of theft, the genius of thieves, that only the pastoral wisdom of Father Brown will be able to convert, in the turning story *The Flying Stars*, before moral degradation turns him into an old petty criminal. Gahagan is an extraordinary creator of tales and anecdotes, who occasionally touches greatness. These men are both alive, manly, carnal, passionate, instinctive, not free from errors, but they are blessed with experiences and encounters in their lives that will enable them to embark on a new life.

Two pairs therefore, each consisting of an all-brain individual with a small body and the other full-bodied, which embody the *psyche-soma* duality. But within the narrative structure of detective fiction, the body loses its disturbing characteristic. Sunday's disgusting face, which contains in itself all the opposites (good and evil), has disappeared, and in its place we find men, all tainted by original sin and thus potentially capable of evil, but also endowed with free will and therefore able to receive the grace that directs them on less dangerous paths.

Along with Flambeau and Gahagan we may also group Gabriel Gale, who was likewise involved in an important love story, housed in a very tall body and with the most exciting forms of creative madness: he is in fact a poet and a painter. But, unlike the other two, he is not endowed with a great mind able to balance in some way his folly, and it is for this reason that his stories are to some extent extravagant and, in terms of narrative, perhaps less convincing.

The physicality of Flambeau, Gale and Gahagan, like that of the Chesterton's other giants, Captain Patrick Dalroy in *The Flying Inn* and Innocent Smith in *Manalive*, is often presented in an ironic, sometimes even grotesque way. But Freud in his essay *On wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* taught us that irony is one of the ways in which the psyche pushed away from itself potentially disturbing contents, in a linguistic structuration which constitutes a formation of compromise.<sup>206</sup> And in a certain way all Chesterton's detective fiction constitutes a realm of the imagination in which there is place simultaneously for two opposing psychic forces: in this case the pair Flambeau-Father Brown for example allows the splitting of psyche and soma, whose unity is at the same time longed for and feared.

Among the saints that Chesterton had most loved, and to whom he dedicated two admirable biographies, there is a formidable pair: St. Thomas and St. Francis. Of St. Thomas Chesterton loved the solid rationality, so similar to his own, and of the second the childish heart and the unlimited love for the wonder of creation. Yet again, the opposition order versus madness is closely linked to that of psyche-soma. With a sort of chiasmus St. Thomas, the mind, had a huge body like his own, while St. Francis, the madness, had a small shape. As in a game of mirrors St. Thomas and St. Francis are the two sides of Chesterton, the two fundamental aspects of his Christian faith and of his vocation as a writer.

The aim of this parenthesis of a psychological nature is not that of casting doubt on the authenticity of the Christian optimism Chesterton had always professed, as some critics did.

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206 Uso qui il termine formazione di compromesso nell'accezione che ne ha dato Francesco Orlando in diverse sue opere. Secondo Orlando lo spazio dell'immaginario che la letteratura apre è spazio di formazione di compromesso. Una definizione di formazione di compromesso può essere la seguente: è una manifestazione semiotico-linguistica in senso lato, che fa posto da sola simultaneamente a due forze psichiche in contrasto diventate significanti attraverso la loro opposizione. Sogno, lapsus, sintomo nevrotico, motto di spirito sono manifestazioni dell'inconscio. Freud teorizza che esse sono sempre formazioni di compromesso. La stessa letteratura è spazio di formazione di compromesso.

Cf. F. Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, pp. 65-67.

Pietro Citati in an article published on “La Repubblica” newspaper on December the 7<sup>th</sup> 1997

wrote:

Dopo il meraviglioso finale di *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton non interrogò più quell'immagine divina. Suppongo che essa continuasse a suscitare dentro di lui i dubbi e le angosce più tortuose, che forse rivelò soltanto al suo confessore. Non finiva di nutrire verso Dio una specie di diffidenza: non cercò di avvicinarsi a lui e di avere qualche rapporto con lui, come i mistici e gli spirituali. Rifiutò ogni mistica e ogni confessione d' anima. Ma accettò Dio, quale Egli fosse: lo lodò, lo esaltò, lo difese, fece l' apologista e il buffone, scrisse migliaia di pagine geniali e farraginose, come se il suo obbligo non potesse avere mai fine.<sup>207</sup>

Citati describes here the relationship between God and Chesterton as problematic. But, as it has been demonstrated, it is the discovery of a God creator separated from his creation that made his faith possible. On the contrary, his embracement of Christian hope results even more heroic if we bear in mind the painful personal experience he probably always carried inside himself. On the last page of *Orthodoxy* it is written that “joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian”<sup>208</sup>. But, it would be useful to recall Borges’ quotation with which this dissertation started:

GKC visse nel corso degli anni intrisi di malinconia a cui si riferisce con la definizione *fin de siècle*. Da questo ineliminabile tedio venne salvato da Whitman e da Stevenson. Eppure qualcosa gli rimase attaccato addosso, rintracciabile nel suo gusto per l’orrido. Il più celebre dei suoi romanzi “*L’uomo che fu Giovedì*”, ha come sottotitolo ‘*Un incubo*’. Avrebbe potuto essere Poe o magari un Kafka; lui comunque preferì – e gli siamo grati della scelta – essere Chesterton e coraggiosamente optò per la felicità o finse di averla trovata.<sup>209</sup>

In opposition to Borges’ observation, reversing the terms of the matter (by a process of paradoxes typical of GKC), Andrea Monda’s intuition is instead extremely enlightening: “oserei proporre che il suo gigantesco segreto forse fu, invece, la sofferenza, il dolore, la nostalgia. In questo senso GKC è un mostro, almeno, bifronte”.<sup>210</sup> To confirm this intuition, there are the beautiful pages

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207 P. Citati, Chesterton romanziere e buffone, “La Repubblica”, 7 Dicembre 1997.

208 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p. 238.

209 J. L. Borges, Introduzione, in G. K. Chesterton *L’occhio di Apollo*, Milano, Franco Maria Ricci, 1979, pp. 7-11.

210 A. Monda, *Il Gigantesco segreto di Chesterton*, in

written by Emilio Cecchi in his celebrated essay *Pesci Rossi*, in which he recounts a visit to Chesterton in his little house in Beaconsfield:

Si potrebbe paragonarlo ad un Padre della Chiesa, obbligato dalla necessità dei tempi e del ministero, a predicare in stile burlesco alle turbe degli scettici e gaudenti. Contro le degenerazioni anarchiche e materialistiche del tardo Romanticismo, egli s'è costituito campione della Famiglia, dell'Ordine, da davanti Chesterton ha la figura di un vescovo. Ma il vescovo si rigira e visto di dietro ha la figura di un clown. [...] Forse ero andato pensando soprattutto a clown (sia detto con il rispetto che gli porto). E avevo trovato soprattutto il vescovo. Ero andato col gusto della bizzarra gioia lirica della quale egli ha scoperto il segreto. E uscendo dalla sua casa portavo meco soprattutto il senso della sua profonda gravità morale e del suo dolore. Lo credevo più giovane, franco e sicuro. Lo trovavo più provato e stanco, più complesso, più commosso e più forte. [...] Me lo aspettavo tranquillo sulla mole del lavoro compiuto. Ed era festoso di lampeggianti certezze. Ma anche pieno di problemi e difficoltà, tutto preso, tenuto, confitto colla sua vasta statura morale nella difficoltà presente del mondo.”<sup>211</sup>

This intuition has then another confirmation in the essay *Dieci Poeti* by Averincev. Averincev analysing the biography of the writer focuses on grief: the presence of suffering, pain and sorrow. Chesterton was a sick man, says Averincev, the unmistakable physical size was a sign of poor health, bad health which led him to death at the age of 62, in June 1936. In addition, the lack of children for so long desired and the loss of his brother Cecil in the war, with whom he had always had a very intense relationship both on the emotional and professional level, certainly contributed to upset him deeply. Despite all this, or rather because of all this, Chesterton courageously opted for happiness: this happiness, which came from faith, was the result and the expression of his free will.

In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton recalls that:

Tutto l'ottimismo di quest'epoca è stato falso e scoraggiante, per questa ragione: che ha sempre cercato di provare che noi siamo fatti per il mondo. L'ottimismo cristiano invece è basato sul fatto che noi non siamo fatti per il mondo".<sup>212</sup>

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[www.bombacarta.com/wp-content/uploads/monografie/chesterton.pdf](http://www.bombacarta.com/wp-content/uploads/monografie/chesterton.pdf)

211 E. Cecchi, in *Pesci Rossi*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1920, p. 78.

212 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* cit., p.



The laic optimism rests therefore on the hope that things will go well. Christian optimism instead persists instead in recognizing that things can go wrong. Among the juvenile verses that Chesterton wrote in those years, there is one called *By The Baby Unborn*, “which imagined the uncreated creature crying out for existence and promising every virtue if he might only have the experience of life.”<sup>213</sup> This poem, as Chesterton tells us in the *Autobiography*, is closely connected with the inspiration of *Manalive*, “a tale of a benevolent being who went about with a pistol, which he would suddenly point at a pessimist, when that philosopher said that life was not worth living.”<sup>214</sup>

Both poetry and novels are at the centre of Chesterton’s inspiration that can be somehow translated as follows: existence is not a good thing only as long as things are for the better but for the fact itself of being opposed to the non-being, and in any way the battle of life is solved, precisely its risk must be accepted with gratitude, its unpredictability; the free will of a person is related to that. An opportunity is given to man. The grateful acceptance of the risk turns everything around us into beautiful gems, as in the perspective of the unborn child, who dreams of the miracle of birth.

Chesterton, compared many times to Poe and Kafka, likewise crossed similar perilous paths of existence, often revealing the dark side of life, but unlike them was able to maintain a deep joy, because, as he himself had sung in the ballad of the *White Horse*:

...the men signed of the Cross of Christ  
Go gaily in the dark...<sup>215</sup>

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213 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* cit., p. 99.

214 *Ibidem.*, p. 100.

215 G. K. Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, excerpt of Book I, The Vision of The King, 1911.





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