THESIS APPROVED

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THE PHILOSOPHIC BASIS OF G. K. CHESTERTON'S LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF HIS THEORY OF LITERATURE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

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A THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who reads, even sketchily, in modern, literary criticism is certain to be struck by one thought: that the theories and opinions of serious critics differ to an almost incredible extent. A book, for example, like Well and Warren's Theory of Literature—which aims at propounding a new theory by the summary, contrast, and elimination of other theories—is testimony enough to these differences.

However, valuable and erudite as that book is, one can search it in vain for a satisfactory explanation of the cause of or reason for such critical diversity. The authors' complaint about the lack of a "literary theory, an organon of methods,"1 by which individual works of literary art can be characterized in universal terms2 is probably true, but not too helpful. Their discussion of the importance, to "the intrinsic study of literature," of understanding the "mode of existence" or "ontological situs"3 of a literary work simply raises

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 129.
the further question: can literary art be explained fully in terms of its nature and function alone? Likewise, what they have to say of metaphor, convincing as it is, leads to further wondering. For example, they state:

Our own view . . . sees the meaning and function of literature as centrally present in metaphor and myth. There are such activities as metaphoric and mythic thinking, a thinking by means of metaphors, a thinking in poetic narrative or vision. All these terms call our attention to the aspects of a literary work which exactly bridge and bind together old divisive components, 'form' and 'matter.' These terms look in both directions; that is, they indicate the pull of poetry toward 'picture' and 'world' on the one hand and toward religion or Weltanschauung on the other.4

But what account, in poetic theory, is to be taken of the reality that evokes the poetic impulse? Is it to be considered valuable only to the extent that it provides grist for the artistic mill? What, in other words, is the connection between literary theory and philosophy, or Weltanschauung?

A different, and, I would suggest, more forthright approach is that of Elder Olson in his essay, "An Outline of Poetic Theory," an essay which may be taken as keynoting the very erudite position of the "Chicago Critics" in their neo-Aristotelian critique of all

4Ibid., p. 182.
modern criticism and especially the "New Critics." In that paper he states definitely that "the extreme diversity of contemporary criticism . . . is connected with the similar diversity of contemporary philosophy. . . ." And he elaborates:

A given comprehensive philosophy invariably develops a certain view of art; the critical theories of Plato, Hume, and Kant, for instance, are not any random views but are generated and determined by their respective philosophies. And while a given criticism or theory of art may not originate in a comprehensive philosophy and may resist reference to one already existent, it is not therefore really independent of a more comprehensive system, for the discussion of art must entail assumptions which involve more than art; it is merely part of a whole as yet undeveloped. In short, since criticism or the theory of art is part of philosophy, it has the same bases as philosophy and is determinate or variable according to the same principles.®

The conclusion Olson draws from these statements, that there is a possibility of a "plurality of valid philosophies" and, therefore, of critical theories, is open to question, of course, but his appraisal of the situation seems, nevertheless, to be both accurate and succinct.®


®Ibid., p. 547. 7Ibid.

More recently, Wimsatt and Brooks in the epilogue to their historical study of criticism (published in 1957), point to the same need for a basic, and in this case, realistic ontology on which to build literary theory. For example:

A theorist of poetry may be driven to be some kind of idealist about the nature of poetry itself or the area of its operation. But if he remains close to the objects of his scrutiny—that is, to actual poems—he will be equally driven to remain a realist in his conception of the universe in which the poetic area is contained and in which poetry finds its reasons. Theories of sheer affectivity and subjective valuing have suffered the paradox of promoting not enthusiasm for value but distance, detachment, cooling neutrality. The sterner metaphysical, cognitive theories, talking about real right and wrong, real beauty and ugliness, are the theories which actually sustain value and make response to value possible. For response cannot feed indefinitely on itself.

It is upon the assumption, that "a given comprehensive philosophy invariably develops a certain view of art," that the present investigation of Chesterton is undertaken. Chesterton's final philosophy, of course, was the "philosophia perennis,"—Scholasticism, which was instinctively that of St. Thomas Aquinas. G. K. had, says Herbert McLuhan, in his introduction to Kenner's Paradox in Chesterton, "an unwavering and metaphysical intuition of being" that was "always in the service of

the search for moral and political order in the current chaos.  

But Chesterton did not confine his attention to politics and morality. He wrote so frequently of literary matters, and was so much concerned with the whole humanistic tradition of Western culture that it is inevitable that "his unfailing sense of the relevance of the analogy of being" should also produce a theory of literature based on his experience. Mentally attuned to Scholasticism, "talking about real right and wrong, real beauty and ugliness," he is able to make comments on the nature and value of literature that strike directly at the heart of the matter. We can only agree, for example, when he says something like this:

Nothing is important except the fate of the soul; and literature is only redeemed from an utter triviality, surpassing that of naughts and crosses, by the fact that it describes not the world around us or the things on the retina of the eye or the enormous irrelevancy of encyclopoedias, but some condition to which the human spirit can come.

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10 Herbert McLuhan, introduction to Paradox in Chesterton, by Hugh Kenner (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), xii.

11 Ibid.

Comments like this one, however, are not philosophical, in the sense of being stated in closely reasoned philosophical terms. They are, instead, paradoxical and metaphorical; literary, in other words.

In outlining this study this last point needs to be emphasized. Chesterton's view of literature, like his view of everything else, has the same basis as Scholastic philosophy: the "unwavering and metaphysical intuition of being." His notions of beauty and art closely correspond to those of St. Thomas (as developed in modern times by men like Jacques Maritain, for example). And as such, they have enormous value for the many contemporary critics who flounder hopelessly on the shoals of materialism or idealism. (Only Scholasticism, with its analogy of being, can navigate those shoals successfully.) But Chesterton's method as a writer was not so much analytic and discursive as imaginative and intuitive, as literature itself is. He deals with art and literature as an artist does, in terms of concrete realities, attempting to divine and express inner meanings through metaphors and symbols.

This imaginative approach to literature is of supreme importance. Without it—without understanding, for example, that what holds a poem together is not a
logical train of thought, but is, rather, the transforming power of emotion recognizing and seizing upon analogical relationships in order to express itself—no true appreciation of literature is possible. Without this imaginative approach, literature is a type of discourse bafflingly illogical: unable to express a clear thought plainly, scientifically; and at the same time, unwilling to be merely edifying, sugar-coating— for earnest readers—distasteful moral sentiments.

It is the thesis of this paper that on these two counts—as an exponent of Aristotelian-Thomistic ideas of being, beauty, and art and as a champion of the imaginative, analogical approach to literature—Chesterton has a value for contemporary criticism that has been too long overlooked, even by Catholic critics.

However, it ought not to be inferred that, in developing this thesis, I have made an exhaustive study of Chesterton and Chesterton scholarship. G. K.'s chief prose works, some sixty volumes, have been examined, as well as a fair sampling of the materials listed in the J. J. Sullivan bibliography (1958) and in the A. C. Prosser catalogue listing. Romig's Guide to Catholic Literature yielded the names of several works on Chesterton not listed by either of those bibliographies.
There are, actually, very many studies of Chesterton, of his religious and political influence, his poetry, and his literary style. Maisie Ward's biography along with her Return to Chesterton are generally considered definitive, although the work of Patrick Braybrooke is also worthy of mention.

In regard to G. K.'s literary criticism there is a very evident division of thought. Some writers, such as Maurice Evans in his prize essay, G. K. Chesterton, feel that G. K.'s literary criticism is of minimal importance, since "he approaches his subjects from a


doctrinal point of view, generally choosing such figures to illustrate his beliefs." Others, like F. A. Lea, think that "the art at which Chesterton excelled was literary criticism. . . . It may be confidently asserted that only a great critic could have composed his parodies on Tennyson and Walt Whitman." After Chesterton's death in 1936 T. S. Eliot asserted in The Tablet that G. K.'s essay on Dickens "seems to me the best essay on that author that has ever been written." In the issue of the following week Douglas Jerrold flatly stated that "Chesterton's Dickens is as near a bad book as Chesterton could ever have written."

Cecil Chesterton, in his G. K. Chesterton: A Criticism published anonymously in 1908, stated his brother's case in this lively manner:

But what many thought almost indecent was the extent to which the neophyte [G. K. C.] seemed to be at ease in the intellectual and artistic Zion which ought to

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have put him on his best behaviour. He walks into its holy places (metaphorically speaking) with his hat on, and utterly refuses to be impressed with its dignity or his own unworthiness. He does not modify or subdue his riotous journalistic style; what was good enough for the readers of 'The Speaker' and the 'Daily News' ought to be good enough for the students of literature. At any rate, it is all he has to give them, and if they do not like it, they can leave it. They did not like it, but to leave it was no easy matter, for the most hardened academic could not disguise from himself the fact that these extraordinary books of criticism which violated every canon of literary decency were uproariously readable.

To a large extent this same attitude prevails today, although George Watson's inclusion, in his 1958 Concise Bibliography of English Literature, of G. K.'s critical works may be taken as proof of some sort of respectability for Chesterton.

It is not my purpose, however, to defend G. K. Chesterton's judgments of individual writers or their works. Granted his unconventionality as a critic and even the fact that he made no pretense to being a philosopher of aesthetics or a theorist of poetry; nevertheless, he had a theory of literature, and a good one. In this paper I shall attempt to trace the outlines of this theory, and to set forth briefly its philosophic basis.

In order to bring into relief G. K.'s philosophic value, a sketch of current misconceptions dominating

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literary theory will be drawn first. In that sketch I shall be following the three main streams of criticism distinguished by Wimsatt and Brooks in their *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. These are: "(1) the mimetic or Aristotelian, which does justice to the world of things and real values and keeps our criticism from being merely idealistic [either in the Platonic or the Kantian sense as so much English criticism is]; (2) the emotive (as developed with most subtlety perhaps by Richards) which does justice to human responses to values . . . [but finds no metaphysical basis for weighing those very values, and, being strictly materialistic, must logically discard them]; (3) the expressionistic and linguistic (par excellence the Crocean), which does justice to man's knowledge as reflexive and creative" . . . [yet lacks the analogy of being on which creation must be based, and so, by ignoring levels of being, ends by being completely idealistic].

Each of these tendencies is the product of "a given comprehensive philosophy." The second and third, both monistic in philosophic origin, fail to cope adequately with being in all its manifestations, and they maintain their coherence only by ignoring what they

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Wimsatt and Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 750.
cannot explain. Chesterton's theory, following the first, dualistic tendency, will be argued as superior in every way to the other two. In contrast to them, it will be set forth as a powerful Christian view of literature, in which art, man, and the universe are in proper focus.

After that, introducing G. K.'s literary theory (which is symbolic, analogical), will be a discussion of primary importance: G. K.'s thought on symbol.

With Chesterton it is fundamental that symbols are absolutely essential to man in his perceiving of and his imaginative expression of reality.²² Impressed as G. K. was with "the fundamental fact of being, as against not being,"²³ he insisted first that it is the duty of the poet to give us glimpses of that being,²⁴ and secondly, that the poet's chief tool in this task

²²How remarkably deep--and correct--was this feeling of Chesterton's can be seen from the following statement of the distinguished contemporary scholar, Mircea Eliade, in his Images et Symboles: "'We are coming today to understand something of which the nineteenth century could have no idea; that symbol, myth, image, belong to the very substance of the psychic life; that you can camouflage them, mutilate or degrade them, but never extirpate them. . . .'" p. 13. Quoted by Gerald Vann, O. P., in The Paradise Tree (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 13.


²⁴Ibid.
Therefore, the second chapter of this paper will be concerned with Chesterton's ideas on the relation of symbols, and thus poetry, to all the rest of reality.

Later, after G. K.'s ideas of the nature of man and the nature of the universe have been explored, it will be seen how these "glimpses" of being are, in fact, that aspect of it which is beauty, the object toward which art directs itself. But first, the monistic tendencies of contemporary criticism need to be taken up.

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CHAPTER I
MODERN CRITICAL TENDENCIES

In the introduction to this study the historical categories outlined by Wimsatt and Brooks were accepted as the three main currents of thought in literary criticism. These are, again, the materialistic psychologism of I. A. Richards, the idealistic expressionism of Croce, and the mimetic dualism of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In this section I shall attempt a brief exposition of the philosophic-critical principles of the first two monistic schools, in order to illustrate their ultimate failure to comprehend the true nature and value of literature, and to point out, by contrast, Chesterton's superiority, not only in his philosophy, but also as a literary theorist.

Richards' position first. Daiches, in his _Critical Approaches to Literature_, seconds the Wimsatt-Brooks estimate of Richards' influence and describes that author's work as an attempt to use modern science itself (especially psychology and semantics) to analyze the nature of poetry and—in an era increasingly scientific—to defend it.

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According to Daiches, Richards' generalizations about the value of poetry are highly questionable since they are "in large measure based on psychological notions which no important contemporary psychologist accepts." Nevertheless, thinks Daiches, "the method, or at least, the tone," of Richards' inquiry is still of great importance. "Critics who have not accepted Richards' theory of value . . . have nevertheless learned from him to observe closely and to conduct their discourses with 'scientific care.'"2

It seems obvious, however, that there is a body of contemporary critics on whom Richards' influence has been more than methodological. These critics proceed on what Wimsatt and Brooks call "the Semantic Principle," a linguistic approach to literature initiated largely by Richards himself.4 S. I. Hayakawa, writing on "Semantics" in Shipley's Dictionary of World Literature, notes that the contributions of semantics to literary criticism and theory were somewhat slow to mature, but that now semantic critics have a definite position, which he summarizes thus:

2Ibid., p. 141. 3Ibid., p. 142. 4Ibid., p. 143.
First, they regard literary and scientific uses of language not as opposed, but as complementary and equally necessary to human existence. In this they differ sharply from those theories of literature that rest upon a disdain of science. Secondly, they think of art as a form of symbolic activity, not unrelated to all the other forms of symbolic activity in which man engages. Third, they tend to account for art in terms of biological function, as in Burke's statement that art is a "remarkably complete kind of biological adaptation." Fourth, they take into account as central data the response of the reader to a work of art. The "poem as such, apart from the reactions of particular readers," which some contemporary schools of criticism seek to study, has, from a semantic point of view, no existence except as black marks on paper which constitute potential stimuli. Lastly, semantic theories of literature tend to relate art to the culture as a whole, and hence to morality. Art is, to the semanticist, not for art's sake, but for life's.

Chief among the proponents of this view, Hayakawa observes, are Thomas C. Pollock, Herbert J. Muller, Kenneth Burke, and Suzanne Langer, who is also an important American apostle of the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer.

In examining the semantic position, one notes immediately Richards' formative influence. The phrase, "literary and scientific uses of language," recalls his distinction between emotive and scientific language in

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6Ibid.
Principles of Literary Criticism. Art as a biological function echoes the chapter, "The Availability of the Poet's Experience," in the same book, where the author describes art in terms of the organizational capacity of the artist's nervous system.

The last two points of Hayakawa's summary also correspond to Richards' theory, though the latter's statement of the third point is a little less crude. Richards defines a poem as

a class of experiences which do not differ in any character more than a certain amount, varying for each character, from a standard experience. We may take as this standard experience the relevant experience of the poet when contemplating the completed composition.7

And finally, on the fourth point: "The arts are our storehouse of recorded values... They record the most important judgments we possess as to the value of experience."8 The ultimate value of poetry, "all the most valuable effects of poetry," must be described in terms of the response it evokes, the "attitudes, the resolution, inter-animation, and balancing of impulses"9 which accompany the reading of it. Art is for life's sake because the purpose of art is to bring about "the

8Ibid., p. 32. 
9Ibid., p. 113.
fine ordering of responses far too subtle to be touched by any general ethical maxim."\textsuperscript{10}

The materialistic bias of this whole theory is obvious, of course, and in the work quoted Richards states it explicitly. He asserts, for example, that "it has long been evident that the mind is the nervous system, or rather a part of its activity."\textsuperscript{11} He also states, emphatically and at some length, his rejection of "Revelation Doctrines." And precisely upon this premise—that no spiritual reality can possibly exist—he undertakes the defense of poetry. That he succeeds only in discrediting it will, I hope, be apparent shortly.

Following the assumption that only material reality exists are Richards' inevitable conclusions that "Science is autonomous" and "so far as any body of reference is undistorted it belongs to Science."\textsuperscript{12} What is "distorted," i.e., not scientific, is therefore "fictitious." The dichotomy is complete; truth or "statement" is possible only to science; every other use of words produces only "pseudo-statement."\textsuperscript{13}

Here is exactly what Chesterton calls the "quality of the madman’s argument, an insane simplicity" which

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 62. \quad \textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 266. \quad \textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
conveys at once the sense of covering everything and the sense of it [sic] leaving everything out."14 And it is poetry, especially, that suffers from the "leaving everything out." Categorized as "pseudo-statement," poetry does not possess an intrinsic value. Realizing this, Richards attempts to assign it an extrinsic one, and so in Principles of Literary Criticism he sets forth what he calls a "psychological theory of value."

According to this theory "anything is valuable which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency."15 For Richards what is important is that which pertains to man's well-being, which he defines as the systemization of impulses which yields "a maximum of varied satisfactions and involves a minimum of suppression and sacrifice."16 Poetry fits into this scheme (and so becomes valuable), because it can assist this process of systemization. In other words, art is again for life's sake--life being a series of "valuable experiences" for "those fortunate people ... whose systems


16Ibid., p. 53.
have developed clearing houses by which the varying claims of different impulses are adjusted."^{17}

To defend poetry thus is somewhat less than effective, since, as Daiches points out "if one does not accept his system of psychology [and no 'important contemporary psychologist' does], if one denies that his description of what happens when we read a poem really represents what takes place, then the whole critical theory falls to the ground."^{18} And with it, of course, the value of poetry.

This ultimate disregard for poetry is not, however, confined to Richards' theory alone. Any materialistic theory in which the mind is merely a part of the nervous system, is bound to regard literature, the arts, with as little respect. And the reason is simply that only by the admission of supra-sensible reality can it be understood that science is not autonomous; that the creative spirit of man is independent of science; that being has several aspects; and that art is a different kind of approach to it, valuable in its own right.

It is not, however, enough merely to assert that spiritual reality exists; it is equally important to reconcile it logically with the material universe. The

^{17}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} ^{18}Daiches, op. cit., p. 139.
failure to make this explanation properly is, for poetry, just as disconcerting as Richards' theorizing. That this is so can be seen by investigating the third critical development defined by Wimsatt and Brooks, that of Crocean idealism. As those authors indicate, this is the weakest of the three positions; but at the same time, it is too important a position and an influence to be ignored.

Croce approaches the problem of art from a philosophic position directly opposite that of Richards; he asserts quite plainly, in his article on aesthetics written for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, that "the value of the contribution made by aesthetics to philosophy as a whole is that it ... prepares the way and leads the mind toward idealism or absolute spiritualism."\textsuperscript{19} Poetry, according to Croce, is "'pure intuition'—pure, that is, of all historical and critical reference to the reality or unreality of the images of which it is woven, and apprehending the pure throb of life in its ideality."\textsuperscript{20}

On the philosophic level this ideality is maintained by an open disregard of real distinctions. Instead, for example, of trying to solve the matter-spirit puzzle, Croce attacks the terms in which it is stated and declares


\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 264.
them to be meaningless. In his own words:

But when a problem is found to be insoluble in the words in which it is stated, the only course open is to criticize these terms themselves, to inquire how they have been arrived at, and whether their genesis was logically sound. In this case, such inquiry leads to the conclusion that the terms depend not upon a philosophical principle, but upon an empirical and naturalistic classification, which has created two groups of facts called internal and external respectively (as if internal facts were not also external, and as if an external fact could exist without being also internal), or souls and bodies, or images and expressions. . . .  

The first result of this kind of reasoning is the complete obliteration of levels of being: "the soul is only a soul in so far as it moves arms and legs, or is action." For Croce as a matter of course there follows the denial of all material reality.

The application, on the aesthetic level, of this monistic theory requires the insistence, peculiarly Crocean, on the identification of artistic intuition and expression. As he himself explains it in his essay on "Aesthetics":

The identity of intuition and expression is, moreover, a principle of ordinary common sense, which laughs at people who claim to have thoughts they cannot express or to have imagined a great picture which they cannot paint. Rem tene, verba sequuntur: if there are no verba, there is no res.

21Ibid., p. 266.  
22Ibid.  
23Ibid.
As a kind of corollary to this notion of the identity of intuition and expression, Croce asserts that artistic expression is all-inclusive; "aesthetic" expression . . . alone really expresses, that is, gives to feeling a theoretical form and converts it into words, song, and outward shape." In regard to feeling, any other use of the term "expression" is "mere metaphor." What this kind of reasoning leads to finally is that all expression is art, hence the tag, "Crocean Expressionism."

Since the weaknesses of this position have been sufficiently exposed by numerous critics, there is little to be gained from belaboring them further. The important point is that again, as in the case with Richards, faulty philosophic thinking leads the literary theorist to a position where literature has no real meaning, no raison d'être. And the doctrine, again, on which each of these philosophic explanations stumble is that of the relationship of spirit and matter.

Nevertheless, this heady idealism has never ceased to be a major influence in criticism as Transcendentalism, Kantianism, Platonism, romantic mysticism,

24 Ibid., p. 265.  
25 Ibid.  
26 Irving Babbitt in The New Laokoon was strongly disagreeing with Croce fifty years ago, as, a century before, Sam Johnson was protesting against Bishop Berkeley.
significant form, even Nihilism attest. Furthermore, this same problem continues to beset contemporary critics, who attempt to avoid both these extreme positions. Of these, possibly Phillip Wheelwright with his The Burning Fountain might be considered a typical example. In that book the author expresses a strong reaction to the positivism of Richards, withdrawing at the same time from a purely idealistic point of view. He knows full well that matter is not all, and he is convinced of the "ontological rigidity" of individual things; but, lacking, as he does, the Aristotelian explanation of matter and form, he is confronted by an insoluble problem. His final decision—that all is flux—is really an admission of failure:

The man of reason is he who seeks to understand the Logos in things not by simplifying and rationalizing it, but by accepting every contradiction which experience offers in its raw state: perceiving that the only oneness of things is the interpenetration and interfusion of their manyness, and that the only immortality consists in the perpetual and omnipresent fatality of dying and being reborn each moment as something new.

And likewise a failure is Wheelwright's earnest attempt

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28Ibid., pp. 11-13.  29Ibid., p. 12.

30Ibid., p. 238.
to establish, on this philosophical basis, a convincing literary theory.

In contrast to these errors and their resulting implications for poetry, there is the solid value of Chesterton's philosophy and his corresponding theory of literature. Unembarrassed by a false view of reality, he is also able to see the true nature of literature, avoiding automatically the untenable positions sketched above. His awareness of spiritual reality frees him from the confining thought that all approaches to reality must either be empirical or have some empirical, pragmatic basis. His appreciation of material reality, as clearly distinct from ideal reality, rescues him from sheer idealism and the weaknesses of such theories as Expressionism. Most important of all, however, is his possession of the philosophical link between matter and spirit, whereby he can provide the artist with an understanding of being and change, and of the particular business of art in relation to both.

In fine, G. K. is able to tell critic and artist alike that "Beatrice is loved because she is beautiful"; (not because loving her helps "adjust the varying claims of different impulses"); and that "she is beautiful because there is behind her a many-sided mystery of beauty
to be seen also in the grass and the sea. . . ." He would insist, furthermore, on the reality of Beatrice, the sea, and the grass, and not merely on that of the mystery of beauty. And finally he would explain that, real as they are, "all beautiful images are shadows of the one real beauty," and that the poet's genuine regard for the images leads him to discover something of Him Who "fathers-forth" all things, and to praise Him with images of his own making.

In the next section it will be my concern to set forth Chesterton's thought regarding those images, i.e., his ideas on symbols and symbolism.

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CHAPTER II
CHESTERTON'S SYMBOLIC APPROACH
TO REALITY AND LITERATURE

For Chesterton, to write in symbols was as natural as to breathe. His grasp of reality was ever a grasp of concrete, living, glowing things. This is precisely the reason for his dedication to literature, to poetry, rather than to philosophy or science. Intensely aware of the "fact of being," he is led to exclaim:

This material world in which such vast systems have been superimposed—this may mean anything. It may be a dream, it may be a joke, it may be a trap or temptation, it may be a charade, it may be the scientific vision: the only thing of which we are certain is this human soul. This human soul finds itself alone in a terrible world, afraid of the grass. It has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters; it will bring them forth again.1

"It has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters." Because existence itself is so awesome, man is unable to give to reality adequate, logical expression. Elsewhere G. K. speaks of nonsense (e.g., that of Carroll and Lear) and faith as the "two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible

as to draw out Leviathan with a hook."^ Chesterton constantly emphasizes the fact that the tremendous mystery of the existence of things cannot be adequately approached except through the imagination, or by "poetry and religion"; that it is the business of art to make this approach, to create symbols--beautiful in themselves--by which realities can somehow be expressed; and that art is aided in this process by the existence, in creation itself, of a principle by which one thing can represent another with a fittingness that transcends logic.3


3Eliade again supports Chesterton excellently on these points: "The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality--the deepest aspects--which defy all other modes of knowledge. Images, symbols, myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche: They meet a need and fulfill a function, to unveil the secret modalities of being. . . . If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things this is precisely because that reality manifests itself in a contradictory fashion and so cannot be expressed in concepts. (One thinks of the desperate efforts of various theologies and metaphysical systems, of east and west alike, to express conceptually the coincidentia oppositorum, a mode of being which is easily--and moreover, abundantly expressed in images and symbols.)" Eliade, Images et Symboles, pp. 13-24, quoted in Vann's, The Paradise Tree, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), pp. 13-14.
Art, then, attempts to "draw out the soul of things" and this by means of symbolic representation.

G. K. again:

Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil. In other words, the natural mystic does know that there is something there; something behind the clouds or within the trees; but he believes that the pursuit of beauty is the way to find it; that imagination is a sort of incantation that can call it up.

What the imagination produces, of course, is the image, the symbol with its two-fold purpose: to reveal the "something there" and to be, in itself, a new creation valuable for its own splendor. Chesterton discusses this first purpose in G. F. Watts, where he avers:

Two men felt a swift, violent, invisible thing in the world; one said the word "hope," the other painted a picture in blue and green paint. The

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4 An interesting parallel to this idea is to be found in Joseph Conrad's Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus. He states there that "Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadow, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential— their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence." A Conrad Argosy, ed. William McFee (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1942), p. 81.

picture is inadequate; the word "hope" is inadequate; but between them, like two angles in the calculation of a distance, they almost locate a mystery, a mystery that for hundreds of ages has been hunted by men and evaded them.  

Consequently, he suggests a definition of symbol as "a display, the best expression of something that cannot otherwise be expressed," and here is the clear assertion that symbol is representational, that it points to a reality beyond itself. More specifically he writes:

> What I have called the truly symbolic school of symbolism . . . [believes] altogether to another, and I cannot but think, a larger world. It is all that world of powers and mysteries beyond mankind which even the sceptic would consent to cover with the celebrated label: Important: if True.

And the second element of this definition of symbols, "the best expression of something that cannot otherwise be expressed," is a justification of all art's cunning. Chesterton does not consider art simply as a means to truth. The "something behind the clouds or within the trees" does not, or should not, overshadow completely the symbolic representation of it, the work of art. The latter is the immediate object of the poet's creative


skill and labor and, once produced, is to be valued for its own sake. So Chesterton seems to be saying in this description of a work of art and its effect:

Poets have never grown used to the stars; and it is their business to prevent anybody else ever growing used to them. And any man who reads for the first time the words, "Night's candles are burnt out," catches his breath and almost curses. ⁹

Also included in this phrase, "the best expression," is the idea that a true symbol has in it a peculiar appropriateness to the thing it symbolizes. This Chesterton asserts in his distinction between symbolism and allegory when he says:

The meaning fits the symbol and the symbol the meaning; and we cannot separate them from each other, as we can in the analysis of an allegory. . . . [Regarding Walter de la Mare]: The great mystic can sometimes present to us a purple parrot or a sea-green monkey, in exactly such a manner as to suggest submerged or mysterious ideas, and even truths, that could not possibly be conveyed by another creature of any other colour. ¹⁰

Probably Chesterton's best expression of the function of the symbol in poetry, which ought now to be considered, is the essay called "The Bones of a Poem." In it, he identifies symbol with the metaphor or image, and asserts that it has often appeared

to be mere ornament, a piece of moulding above the gateway; but it is actually the keystone of the arch. Take away the particular image employed and the whole fabric of thought falls with a crash. It is not the thought that is the deep or central thing; one might almost say that it is the phrase. In In Memoriam, for example, there is a description incomparably vague and perfect of the empty and idle mood often produced by sorrow:

"The stars," she whispers, "blindly run,
A web is wov'n across the sky;
From out waste places comes a cry,
And murmurs from the dying sun."

The metaphors of the passage, the stars, the web, the murmurs of the sun, are not mere illustrations, they are the original part of the thought. The idea of the world as a chance product has often been uttered, what is new and thrilling in the matter is the fact that the waste places and the cry of the dying sun make the idea so suddenly vivid to us that it ceases to become a thought and becomes a feeling. 11

Chesterton is simply insisting that poetry is not "an ornamental or indirect way of stating philosophy by a perfectly simple and direct way of stating something that is outside philosophy." 12 As there are "innumerable shades and gradations of feeling," so there are "fleeting and haphazard sights of nature that are words out of an unknown dictionary." 13 It is the bringing together of these two elements that is the business of poetry, or as he words it: "Poetry is not a selection

12Ibid., p. 105.
13Ibid.
of the images which will express a particular thought; it is rather an analysis of the thoughts which are evoked by a certain image.  

To explain further—and test—this symbolic approach to literature, it might be interesting to examine a poem in this light, as "an analysis of the thoughts evoked by a certain image." Hopkins' "The Windhover" can serve as an example.

In that poem there is first the poet's experience of a particular reality, which becomes the basic image: the bird at dawn hovering almost motionless in the air, "riding ... the rolling level"; then its sudden "giving" before the wind and the powerful, beautiful arc it cuts as it swings off, half with, half against the wind. The images of the reined horse and the skate's heel follow, not logically surely, but from keen, sensuous analysis of the primary experience with the bird. The next lines, "Brute beauty, etc.," in the same kind of evocation, celebrate as a "billion times told lovelier, more dangerous" (than the mere hovering) this "buckling" before the wind. "O my chevalier" adds the image of the military nobleman, reinforcing not only "valour," "act,"

14Ibid., p. 103.
"pride," but also "buckle"—with the connotation of service to be rendered.

The next two images are entirely removed, logically, from the windhover; yet imaginatively they are peculiarly related. As "fire breaks from thee" by "buckling," so a plowshare grows shiny from "sheer plod" down the furrows. Finally, taking one step more, Hopkins finishes the poem with the embers image, again irrelevant and relevant at the same time. In falling, the embers destroy—"gall"—themselves, but by this very act they are transformed from "blue-bleak" to "gold vermilion," a phrase echoing both the sound and the meaning of the whole windhover image.

The poem's dedication, "To Christ Our Lord," deepens the whole work immeasurably, and there flashes on the reader—so vividly "that it ceases to become a thought and becomes a feeling"—the tremendous paradoxical value of sacrifice, particularly of the sacrifice of Christ.

Certainly this poem exemplifies G. K.'s principle that the original image, not an abstract thought, evokes the metaphors, which are the original creation of the poem. It illustrates also Welleck and Warren's "metaphoric thinking, a thinking by means of metaphors, a
thinking in poetic narrative or vision." Finally, through Chesterton's hypothesis, the validity of such thinking becomes apparent, that validity which is the whole point of art—a symbolic approach to reality in which logical relations are largely replaced by analogical ones. Like this poem, any work of art begins with the artist's experience of concrete reality, its beauty and perfection. As he "analyzes" the thoughts evoked by it, his imagination produces new images which seem to grow one out of the other. Thus in "The Windhover" there is no real logical connection between that bird and "blue-bleak embers," or between the embers and Christ Our Lord; and to labor the point of comparison logically, as is often done in criticism, is to mistake the whole process. Yet it can hardly be denied that they are related, that there is among them a certain tension that makes the unity of the whole piece possible.

Chesterton would say that this tension has its roots in the very nature of being, which itself must be understood as analogous. Thus in a remarkable passage in All Is Grist, he convincingly explains:

This summoning of remote symbols, this calling of spirits from the vasty deep, like the sea-green Glaucus into the presence of Beatrice, does suggest something involved in all the theology of matter. It suggests that all beautiful images are shadows of the one real beauty, and can be in a sense
shifted or exchanged for its service. It prevents mere fixed idolatry of one shadow in one mirror, as if it were the origin of all. Beatrice is loved because she is beautiful; but she is beautiful because there is behind her a many-sided mystery of beauty, to be seen also in the grass and the sea, and even in the dead gods. There is a promise in and yet beyond all such pictures; and the great poet can see grass or the great sea or the great ships going over it, hearing a sort of whisper: "Thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty."\footnote{15}{G. K. Chesterton, \textit{All Is Grist}, pp. 128-129.}

Incidentally, it is Chesterton's idea also that it is precisely in his imagery that a writer displays his originality. In the artist's mind is formed a sort of pattern of imagery, and this "general atmosphere, and pattern or structure of growth, governs all his creations however varied; and because he can in this sense create a world, he is in this sense a creator..."\footnote{16}{G. K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1928), p. 27.} But that is another aspect of the matter.

In this imaginative view of literature Chesterton does not conceive of the symbol as operative only in poetry. Rather, he thinks of the whole of literature as symbolic. Man, the observer and creator, confronts reality and then produces an expression of it, and of himself in relation to it, in various literary forms. In G. K.'s words: "Every form of literary art must be a symbol of some
phase of the human spirit."\(^\text{17}\) Frequently in his writings Chesterton comes back to this idea. For instance, in the essay just quoted, he is defending farce, which, he says, represents or symbolizes joy, a "healthy madness," a "nameless anarchism." He illustrates:

To the quietest human being, seated in the quietest house, there will sometimes come a sudden and unmeaning hunger for the possibilities or impossibilities of things; he will abruptly wonder whether the teapot may not suddenly begin to pour out honey or sea-water, the clock to point to all hours of the day at once, the candle to burn green or crimson, the door to open upon a lake or a potato-field instead of a London street.\(^\text{18}\)

Likewise, he sees in popular fiction a symbolic representation of the metaphysical situation of man, man with his freedom of choice and the obligation to earn his happiness. This is from *Orthodoxy* and it illustrates the first point:

> But the point is that a story is exciting because it has in it so strong an element of will, of what theology calls free-will. You cannot finish a sum how you like. When somebody discovered the Differential Calculus there was only one Differential Calculus he could discover. But when Shakespeare killed Romeo he might have married him to Juliet's old nurse if he had felt inclined.\(^\text{19}\)

And on the second point:

\(^{17}G.~K.~Chesterton,~*The~Defendant*,~p.~123.\)

\(^{18}Ibid.,~p.~125.\)

\(^{19}G.~K.~Chesterton,~*Orthodoxy*,~p.~254.\)
Exactly as a man in an adventure story has to pass various tests to save his life, so the man in this philosophy has to pass several tests and save his soul. In both there is an idea of free will operating under conditions of design; in other words, there is an aim and it is the business of man to aim at it; we therefore watch to see whether he will hit it.  

In the drama—especially that governed by the dramatic unities—there is a symbolic showing forth of the importance of the family. "The drama is domestic, and dramatic because it is domestic," G. K. wrote; and he contended that marriage is "the theatre of spiritual drama, the place where things happen, especially the things that matter." He also suggests that a more subtle study of the unities of time and place might have led us toward what is perhaps the last secret of all legend and literature. It might have suggested why poets, pagan or not, returned perpetually to the idea of happiness as a place for humanity as a person. It might suggest why the world is always seeking for absolutes that are not abstractions; why fairy-land was always a land, and even the Superman was almost a man.  

A final example of this notion of the symbolic quality of literature relates to lyric poetry, and to its essential characteristic, rhyme. Chesterton believes that, while rhythm deals with similarity, rhyme deals  

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22 Ibid., p. 114.  
23 Ibid., p. 116.
with identity, and thereby reflects an important human quality:

Now in the one word identity are involved perhaps the deepest and certainly the dearest human things. He who is homesick does not desire houses or even homes. He who is lovesick does not want to see all the women with whom he might have fallen in love. . . . Songs, especially the most poignant of them, generally refer to some absolute, to some positive place or person for whom no similarity is a substitute. In such a case all approximation is mere asymptotic. . . . Anyhow, it will generally be found that where this call for the identical has been uttered most ringingly and unmistakably in literature, it has been uttered in rhyme.24

A kind of corollary to this theory—that every phase of literary art is symbolic of some phase of the spirit of man—is another idea of almost equal importance to Chesterton, and that is the popular quality of great literature. A great part of Chesterton's wonder at, and reverence for, things created is directed at man, at "all that is towering and mysterious in the dignity and destiny of the lonely house of Adam."25

And so, he seems never to tire of saying that the true poet, the great writer, represents the common man and his feeling. For example, "poets are those who share these popular sentiments, but can so express them

24 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

that they prove themselves the strange and delicate things they really are."\(^{26}\) Or, "the poets carry the popular sentiments to a keener and more splendid pitch."\(^{27}\) And finally:

. . . the great poet only professes to express the thought that everybody has always had. The greatness of Homer does not consist in proving, by the death of Hector, that the Will to Live is a delusion and a snare; because it is not a delusion and a snare. It does not consist in proving, by the victory of Achilles, that the Will to Power must express itself in a Superman; for Achilles is not a Superman, but, on the contrary, a hero. The greatness of Homer consists in the fact that he could make men feel, what they were already quite ready to think, that life is a strange mystery in which a hero may err and another hero may fail. The poet makes men realize how great are the great emotions which they, in a smaller way, have already experienced. Every man who has tried to keep any good thing going, though it were a little club or paper or political protest, sounds the depths of his own soul when he hears that rolling line . . . : "For truly in my heart and soul I know that Troy will fall." Every man who looks back on old days, for himself and others, and realizes the changes that vex something within us that is unchangeable, realizes better the immensity of his own meaning in the mere sound of the Greek words, which only mean, "For, as we have heard, you too, old man, were at one time happy." These words are in poetry, and therefore they have never been translated. . . . The great poet exists to show the small man how great he is. . . . The great poet is alone strong enough to measure that broken strength we call the weakness of man.\(^{28}\)


\(^{27}\)Ibid.

\(^{28}\)G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 27-28.
In this section we are engaged in the delightful but formidable task of drawing such jewels of literary philosophy into the rigid pattern of a defense of symbolism. It is precisely the prodigal richness of G.K.'s thought that has harmed his influence. Thus, at the cost of some real loss of spontaneity, we believe we have here established four cardinal points in the exposition of Chesterton's symbolism. The first is that he considers the symbol, product of the imagination, to be man's chief means of expressing the mysteries of reality; secondly, that in poetry the symbol, or metaphor, is not only pivotal, the "keystone of the arch," but is also the test of the poet's originality. Third, he feels that the whole of literature is a symbolic representation of the spirit of man, each literary form expressing a phase of man's thought and life; and finally, that great poetry is expressive of the thoughts and feelings of the ordinary man, who by nature and dignity is unique in creation.
CHAPTER III
CHESTERTON'S UNDERSTANDING
OF THE NATURE OF MAN

In the introduction to this investigation of Chesterton’s literary theory it has been noted that G. K. was an Aristotelian realist, one who felt, with uncommon force, the fact and mystery of being. It has been indicated also that, as a result, his theory of literature is based on the idea of symbol, of "meaning" exhibited through image. There was the further suggestion that Chesterton valued this imaginative or symbolic approach to reality far more than he did the approach of mere logic or science, and that he felt, therefore, that the poet is closer to the ordinary man than the professor.¹

Chesterton’s insistence on the importance of the imaginative approach to reality, and man’s imaginative expression of reality by symbol is rooted, of course, in his understanding of man’s nature. He was aware, as contemporary scholars increasingly are, that "symbol, myth, image belong to the very substance of the psychic life"; and that the human tendency toward "symbol-making" is

¹G. K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 49.
a response to the nature of being itself—"reality manifests itself in a contradictory fashion and so cannot be expressed in concepts."²

In this section then—devoted to G. K.'s notion of the nature of man—it will be seen that Chesterton's tenets are aggressively those of Catholicity: that man is a rational animal; that, although crippled by original sin, he is the image of God and the apex of the material world; that he has free will and an eternal destiny. It is also to be noted, however, that G. K.'s approach to the problem of man's nature is, characteristically, through the imagination. It is experimental, not philosophical or theological in the strict sense. Because of his ever-present awareness of the nature of being, of its oneness and its multiplicity, G. K. believes that man's creation of symbols is incontrovertible evidence of his nature. In his own words:

It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brute—in kind and not in degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of man. . . . Art is the signature of man.³


³G. K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 32.
And again,

All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot even talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature. In other words, every sane sort of history must begin with man as man, a thing standing absolute and alone. How he came there, or indeed how anything else came there, is a thing for theologians and philosophers and scientists and not for historians. But an excellent test case of this isolation and mystery is the matter of the impulse of art. This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature. Nothing in that sense could be made in any other image but the image of man.

"Nothing could be made in any other image but the image of man." This point bears consideration and expansion, for it leads directly into the heart of G.K.'s literary theory. In this same passage he goes on to say:

... the clearest and most convenient example to start with is this popular one of what the cave-man really did in his cave. It means that somehow or other a new thing appeared in the cavernous night of nature, a mind that is like a mirror. It is like a mirror because in it alone all the other shapes can be seen like shining shadows in a vision. Above all, it is like a mirror because it is the only thing of its kind. Other things may resemble it or resemble each other in various ways; other things may excel it or excel each other in various ways; just as in the furniture of a room a table may be round like a mirror or a cupboard may be larger than a mirror. But the mirror is the only thing that can contain them all. Man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things; man is the image of God.

Man is the "mirror," "reflection," "microcosm," "image of God"—these judgments are almost Chesterton's whole

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4Ibid., pp. 33-34.  
5Ibid.
philosophy of art. Man is the image of the Creator, and so man can create, in the sense that he can produce that new thing; his comment or reflection on reality. He is a "microcosm, the measure of all things," and so it is his feeling, his emotion that is the stuff of art. As G. K. says elsewhere:

... poetry does rest upon primitive feeling. ... Poetry deals entirely with those great eternal and mainly forgotten wishes which are the ultimate despots of existence. Poetry presents things as they are to our emotions, not as they are to any theory, however plausible, nor any argument, however conclusive. ... And here come in the whole value and object of poetry, that it is perpetually challenging all systems with the test of a terrible sincerity. The practical value of poetry is that it is realistic upon a point upon which nothing else can be realistic, the point of the actual desires of man.  

Obviously, then, because "primitive feeling," "eternal wishes," "the desires of man" cannot be photographed, ("it is said that art should represent life. So indeed it should, but it labours under the primary disadvantage that no man has seen life at any time. ...") The Coloured Lands, p. 83), art of necessity is symbolic. To view art thus, as symbolic, as attempting "the best expression of what cannot otherwise be expressed," is to presume the matter-spirit duality of created things. Art, then, is what it is because being is what it is.

Chesterton consistently follows out these ideas in his comments on various literary forms. Illustrating, for example, man's position in creation are these remarks on fairy tales and tales of terror. "The old fairy tales make the hero a normal human boy; it is his adventures that are startling; they startle him because he is normal." And in regard to tales of terror: "Man, the central pillar of the world, must be upright and straight; around him all the trees and beasts and elements and devils may crook and curl like smoke if they choose. All really imaginative literature is only the contrast between the weird curves of Nature and the straightness of the soul."

The antithesis in Alexander Pope's writing is, for Chesterton, symbolic also of the nature of reality, and certainly, he felt, is not artificial, as has often been asserted. He explains:

An element of paradox runs through the whole of existence itself. It begins in the realm of ultimate physics and metaphysics, in the two facts that we cannot imagine a space that is infinite, and that we cannot imagine a space that is finite. It runs through the immost complications of divinity, in that we cannot conceive that Christ in the wilderness was truly pure, unless we also conceive that he desired to sin. It runs, in the same manner, through all the minor matters of morals, so that we cannot imagine courage existing except in conjunction with fear, or magnanimity existing except in conjunction

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with some temptation to meanness. If Pope and his followers caught this echo of natural irrationality, they were not any the more artificial. Their antitheses were fully in harmony with existence, which is itself a contradiction in terms.\(^9\)

So also in the choruses of the old ballads G. K. finds a philosophic meaning, a reflection again of the nature of being. In *Alarms and Discursions* he writes:

> The chorus of a song, even of a comic song, has the same purpose as the chorus in a Greek tragedy. It reconciles men to the gods. It connects this one particular tale with the cosmos and the philosophy of common things. Thus we constantly find in the old ballads, especially the pathetic ballads, some refrain about the grass growing green, or the birds singing, or the woods being merry in spring. These are windows opened in the house of tragedy; momentary glimpses of larger and quieter scenes, of more ancient and enduring landscapes. Many of the country songs describing crime and death have refrains of a startling joviality like cock crow, just as if the whole company were coming in with a shout of protest against so sombre a view of existence... \(^9\)

Commenting on heroic comedy, Chesterton draws attention to the fact that "almost all the primitive legends of the world are comedies, not only in the sense that they have a happy ending, but in the sense that they are based upon a certain optimistic assumption that the hero is destined to be the destroyer of the monster."\(^11\)

Here, too, is the reflection of man, the image of God, in a literary form.

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9G. K. Chesterton, *Varied Types*, p. 46.
11G. K. Chesterton, *Varied Types*, p. 73.
Finally, as has already been noted, the very nature of a story depends on the fact of man's free will: "a story is exciting because it has in it so strong an element of will, of what theology calls free-will."\(^\text{12}\)

Two final points remain to be considered: Chesterton's belief in the effects of original sin and in the eternal destiny of man, dependent on his free choice. The latter point will be taken up presently in regard to man's place in the created universe. The first point is clear to G. K. from a study of mythology. This is again the imaginative approach since, as he says, "a myth is a work of the imagination and therefore a work of art. It needs a poet to make it."\(^\text{13}\) In the chapter, "The Demons and the Philosophers," in *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton writes apropos original sin:

> I have dwelt at some little length on this imaginative sort of paganism, which has crowded the world with temples and is everywhere the parent of popular festivity. . . . In this very varied and often very vague polytheism there was a weakness of original sin. Pagan gods were depicted as tossing men like dice; and indeed they are loaded dice. About sex especially men are born unbalanced; we might almost say men are born mad. They scarcely reach sanity till they reach sanctity. This disproportion dragged down the winged fancies; and filled the


\(^\text{13}\)G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, p. 100.
end of paganism with a mere filth and litter of spawning gods.\textsuperscript{14}

Again we are brought back to the idea that art reflects nature, especially the nature of man. "Art is the signature of man"; through it can be discovered what man is. But besides the nature of man, art also reflects the nature of the universe, and so it will be the business of the next section of this paper to illustrate G. K.'s thought on that matter.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 116.
CHAPTER IV
THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE,
AS G. K. SAW IT

Since it is partly the thesis of this paper that literary theory originates in philosophy and that it is the Aristotelian-Thomistic bases of Chesterton's theory that especially recommend it to contemporary consideration, it is necessary, of course, to consider here those bases. Again, it will be noted that this particular philosophy commanded Chesterton's belief because he thought it satisfied not only the reason, but also the imagination. This latter aspect, furthermore, is the one that first convinced him, as he indicates in Orthodoxy: "I knew the magic beanstalk before I had tasted beans; I was sure of the Man in the Moon before I was certain of the moon. This is at one with all popular tradition."\(^1\) He goes on, in the same passage, to speak of this imaginative approach as "a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts."\(^2\) Because he also felt this approach

\(^1\) G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 87-88.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 89.
to be more appealing to men generally—"there are more poets than non-poets in the world"—he examines it the more frequently. As a result, there emerges from his writings a complete, though loosely organized (extrinsically), statement of natural philosophy, imaginatively approached.

It is important, of course, to realize that G. K. also appreciated the essentials of the rational or strictly philosophical approach to these matters. In connection with Chesterton's *Saint Thomas Aquinas* Anton Pegis wrote: "He [Chesterton] has a feeling for what is essential in St. Thomas' thought. ... He knows and presents with exasperating ease St. Thomas' Christian Aristotelianism. He knows the Angelic Doctor and his defense of Aristotle against the Averroists."\(^\text{4}\)

In this section on G. K.'s philosophical view of the universe four main points will be noted: his rejection of materialism and his insistence on matter-spirit duality in the composition of being; secondly, his conviction concerning the reality of the experience of being, his acceptance, that is, of Aristotelian-Thomistic realism—"There is and Is"; thirdly, the understanding of being

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as changing, explained by means of potency and act; and finally, the theological applications of the ideas of potentiality and contingency as they concern the nature and destiny of man.

It is to be understood that these points were presupposed, actually, in the discussion of the last section on the nature of man. They constitute the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the view of man there expressed. Insofar as man is part of the universe, St. Thomas, for example, considers him after created things in general. The present arrangement has been made because art, the work of man, has been the starting place of this entire discussion.

But to return to the first point, Chesterton on materialism: In saying that "Art is the signature of man," G. K. was adverting to the spiritual principle in man's nature. Again, this statement presupposes that the universe is not strictly material, that there is spiritual reality as well. Chesterton repeatedly asserts the latter as a fact, as for example, when he says:

In the last analysis most common things will be found to be highly complicated. Some men of science do indeed get over the difficulty by dealing only with the easy part of it; thus they will call first love the instinct of sex and the awe of death the instinct of self-preservation. But this is only getting over the difficulty by describing peacock green by calling it blue. There is blue in it. . . . No man could
say exactly how much his sexuality was coloured by a clean love of beauty, or by the mere boyish itch for irrevocable adventure, like running away to sea. No man could say how far his animal dread of the end was mixed up with mystical traditions touching morals and religion. It is exactly because these things are animal, but not quite animal that the dance of all the difficulties begins. The materialists analyse the easy part, deny the hard part, and go home to their tea.5

Both in *Orthodoxy* and in *The Everlasting Man* it is G. K.'s contention that to be **sane**, to be **human**, means to recognize the existence of spiritual reality. In the chapter called "The Maniac" in *Orthodoxy* he argues:

As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has just the quality of the madman's argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out. . . . Somehow his scheme, like the lucid scheme of the madman, seems unconscious of the alien energies and the large indifference of the earth; it is not thinking of the real things of the earth, of fighting peoples or proud mothers, or first love or fear upon the sea.6

And again, in connection with his discussion of mythology in *The Everlasting Man*:

The crux and crisis is that man found it natural to worship, even natural to worship unnatural things. The posture of the idol might be stiff and strange; but the gesture of the worshipper was generous and beautiful. He not only felt freer when he bent; he actually felt taller when he bowed; . . . If man

cannot pray he is gagged; if he cannot kneel he is in irons. 7

But how—by what philosophical process—does G. K. explain reality? In his *Saint Thomas Aquinas* he identifies his own thought with that of the great doctor. He discusses what he calls the "essential Thomist idea," upon which rests "the whole cosmic system of Christendom," and states that since his childhood it had been one of his own most profound convictions. 8 That essential idea is, of course, the reality of the experience of being. Chesterton develops it thus:

When a child looks out of the nursery window and sees anything, say the green lawn of the garden, what does he actually know; or does he know anything? There are all sorts of nursery games of negative philosophy played around this question. A brilliant Victorian scientist delighted in declaring that the child does not see any grass at all; but only a sort of green mist reflected in a tiny mirror of the human eye. . . . Men of another school answer that grass is a mere green impression on the mind; and that he can only be conscious of his own consciousness; which happens to be the one thing that we know the child is not conscious of at all. . . . St. Thomas Aquinas, suddenly intervening in this nursery quarrel, says emphatically that the child is aware of *Ens*. Long before he knows that grass is grass, or self is self, he knows that something is something. Perhaps it would be best to say very emphatically (with a blow on the table), "There is and Is." . . . upon this sharp pin-point of reality, he rears by long

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logical processes that have never really been success­fully overthrown, the whole cosmic system of Christen­dom. 9

This admission of man's direct awareness of real­ity both precludes the notion that the mind knows only sense impressions (and does not therefore contact reality) and affirms in being a principle of substantiality, in spite of the fact of change. Continuing his discussion G. K. says that "Aquinas insists very profoundly, but very practically, that there instantly enters, with this idea of affirmation, the idea of contradiction," and that "Aquinas is nowhere more subtle than in pointing out that being is not strictly the same as truth; seeing truth must mean the appreciation of being by some mind capable of appreciating it." 10

After these primary admissions— that "something is something" and that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time— comes the explanation of changes in being. This next step, says Chesterton, "represents exactly the point at which nearly all other systems go wrong, and in taking the third step abandon the first." 11 He continues:

Most thinkers, on realising the apparent mutability of being, have really forgotten their own realisa­tion of the being, and believed only in mutability.

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9Ibid. 10Ibid., p. 167. 11Ibid., p. 168.
They cannot even say that a thing changed into another thing; for them there is no instant in the process at which it is a thing at all. It is only a change. It would be more logical to call it nothing changing into nothing, than to say (on these principles) that there ever was or will be a moment when the thing is itself. St. Thomas maintains that the ordinary thing at any moment is something; but it is not everything that it could be. There is a fullness of being, in which it could be everything that it can be. Thus, while most sages come at last to nothing but naked change, he comes to the ultimate thing that is unchangeable, because it is all the other things at once. While they describe a change which is really a change in nothing, he describes a changelessness which includes the changes of everything. Things change because they are not complete; but their reality can only be explained as part of something that is complete. It is God.\textsuperscript{12}

Compressed into this paragraph are the main principles on which rests Chesterton's view of the universe. The fact of change is logically explained only by the idea of potency, which involves necessarily the notion of causality. In the matter of existence where beings are considered as brought from the potency for existence to the act of existence, reason discovers two types of beings: contingent and necessary. The being which depends on another for its actual movement from non-being to being, is contingent; that which is the ultimate

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., pp. 169-170. Cf. this passage from St. Thomas' "Treatise on the Creation" in the Summa Theologica: "It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. Now it has been shown above when treating of
source of all movement is necessary. Here is a typical Chestertonian application of the idea:

Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?\(^\text{13}\)

Thus G. K. (and by the same process, St. Thomas\(^\text{14}\)) affirms the necessity of a Creator.

Transferred to the theological plane this idea of contingency has tremendous implications for the creature, man. After extremely careful analysis of man's intellect and will, St. Thomas in his study of man concludes that man's final end is happiness, that it is attainable, that only in God is complete happiness to be found, and that it is the reward of good acts.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 98.

\(^{14}\) First proof for the existence of God, Summa Theologica, P. I., Q. 2, a.3.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., "Treatise on the Last End," P. II, Qs. 1-5.
Chesterton, in Orthodoxy again, relates how he rejoiced at the discovery that "man is a monstrosity," that he is "in the wrong place," and does not "fit into the world." This knowledge "found out and illuminated forgotten chambers in the dark house of infancy. I knew now why grass had always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home." In this same fanciful way, by what he calls the "second great principle of the fairy philosophy," he explains the necessity laid on man to earn his salvation. In his own words:

Touchstone talked of much virtue in an "if"; according to elfin ethics all virtue is in an "if." The note of the fairy utterance always is, "You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, if you do not say the word 'cow!'". . . The vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things conceded depend upon one small thing withheld. . . . Now, the point here is that to me this did not seem unjust. If the miller's third son said to the fairy, "Explain why I must not stand on my head in the fairy palace," the other might fairly reply, "Well, if it comes to that, explain the fairy palace." . . . And it seemed to me that existence was itself so very eccentric a legacy that I could not complain of not understanding the limitations of the vision when I did not understand the vision they limited.

Such, then, is G. K.'s view—reflected symbolically,

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16G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 146-147.

he feels, in fairy tales\textsuperscript{18}--of the universe and the destiny of man. In it he insists first on the existence of spiritual reality; then, in his explanation of reality, on the fact of man's primary awareness of being; he solves the problem of change through Aristotle's potency-act concept, and arrives, by means of the Scholastic axiom, "everything that is moving is moved by another," at the idea of a Creator. Rising then to the theological plane, he considers man's destiny in the light of the fact that man is contingent, a creature with intellect and free will, whose final end is a happiness to be found only in God.

Upon these philosophical and theological foundations Chesterton builds a theory of art that is truly

\textsuperscript{18}On the artistic level, in his clever \textit{How Not to Write a Play}, Walter Kerr corroborates Chesterton's point exactly. There Kerr states: "Above all, our dramatists must rid themselves of the suggestion that 'story' is the irresponsible invention of profiteering mountebanks. Most of them, nowadays, are inclined to lump 'story' and 'fairy tale' into the same grandmitherly handbag, and to toss away the handbag as trash.

"But there is a sense in which the wildest fairy tale is truer than some of the timeless, pressureless plays the modern theater finds 'honest.' A good fairy tale is always a primitive and fantastic mirror of the way things are. It may be advisable to try to bring the mirror more sharply into focus; it is never advisable to break it. That 'if' of the fairy tale is an 'if' that haunts all of us, day and night. 'What happens next' is a permanent whisper inside us." (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 139-140.
symbolic, and one that provides for the artist an objective basis from which to view himself, his subject, and his creation. That theory of art will be the subject of the next section.
CHAPTER V

G. K.'S IDEA OF BEAUTY, ITS RELATION TO BEING AND TO ART

As I have said, it will be the purpose of this last section to outline—more specifically than was done in Chapter II—Chesterton's theory of art and, therefore, of beauty. It will be seen that G. K.'s ideas of beauty are in direct line with Aristotelian and Thomistic thought, particularly as explained in modern times by Jacques Maritain; and that these ideas can, moreover, be so systematized as to explain first the relation of beauty and being, and then that of art and beauty. Lastly, G. K.'s thought regarding the artistic impulse and aim will be examined and compared with that of Maritain, in order to illustrate the philosophic validity of Chesterton's perceptions.

In the last section it became clear that G. K. believes, with St. Thomas, that "there is and is." It is Chesterton's profound awareness of this tremendous fact that lies back of all his thought on literature. It is significant that it is in his essay on Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry that he says:

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and
that we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthinking. For he who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our grumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude.¹

He goes on to say that "that light of the positive is the business of the poets, because they see all things in the light of it more than do other men."² They are to give men glimpses of the world "when God saw that it was good," and "we shall know them for the Sons of God, when they are still shouting for joy."³

Here, then, is G. K.'s linking together of reality and art, through the bond, implicit but real, of beauty. A look at the Thomistic concept of beauty will confirm this connection.

The idea of beauty is held, by the Scholastics generally, to be a transcendental, i.e., a concept which, like being itself, is said to be applicable, analogously, to all things that are. Like unity (being as undivided), truth (being as confronting the power of knowledge), and goodness (being as confronting the power of desire),

¹G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 33.
²Ibid. ³Ibid., p. 34.
beauty is an aspect of being, one with it insofar as it is considered in its metaphysical reality. "It may be said that Beauty is the radiance of all the transcendentalas united."\(^4\) In St. Thomas' words:

Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally, for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and this is why goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to appetite (goodness being what all things desire), and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to a cognitive power, for those things are said to be beautiful which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion, for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is like them—because the sense too is a sort of reason, as is every cognitive power. Now, since knowledge is by assimilation and likeness relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.\(^5\)

Because everything that is is good, and beauty and goodness are "identical fundamentally," it follows that everything that is is beautiful. Maritain writes:

"Like being and other transcendentalas, it [beauty] is essentially analogous; . . . each kind of being is in its own way, is good in its own way, is beautiful in its own way."\(^6\)


\(^5\)St. Thomas, Summa Theologica, P. I, Q. 5, a. 5.

So Chesterton, in saying that the poet is to be concerned with the fact of reality, "the light of the positive," is saying, in effect, that beauty, the radiance of being, is the prime concern of the artist; or, in other words, that the poet is to concern himself with being under the aspect of beauty. "The poets have never grown used to the stars; and it is their business to prevent anybody else ever growing used to them," wrote G. K. in Chaucer.

In another passage on Stevenson he states this aim again, along with the major metaphysical problem it poses. In speaking of Stevenson's character Huish, he said:

Mr. Huish is a deformity, but he is a definite form. This may not be the highest artistic quality, but it is not turning everything to prettiness. It is turning everything to beauty, even to the terrible beauty that is made out of the harmony of ugly things. And that is surely not very far off from the primary purpose of art.  

To reconcile the artist's concern with the splendor formae— the beauty of being-as-such and the beauty--or ugliness--of particular, material things, an important distinction must here be made. It is the distinction between transcendental beauty and the beauty of

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material things, called by the philosophers aesthetic beauty, and defined as "that which being seen, pleases—id quod visum placet." In this kind of beauty the emphasis is on man's intellectual and sensible perception of an object and on the response it calls forth from him. "If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the bare fact of its being given to the intuition of the soul, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful," says Maritain, echoing St. Thomas. And in distinguishing it further from transcendental beauty the modern philosopher writes:

When it comes to aesthetic beauty, we have to do with a province of beauty in which sense and sense perceptions play an essential part, and in which, as a result, not all things are beautiful. The presence of the senses, which depend on our fleshly constitution, is inherently involved in the notion of aesthetic beauty. I would say that aesthetic beauty, which is not all beauty for man, but which is beauty most naturally proportioned to the human mind, is a particular determination of transcendental beauty: it is transcendental beauty as confronting not simply the intellect but the intellect and the sense acting together in a single act; say it is transcendental beauty confronting the sense as imbued with intelligence, or intellection as engaged in sense perception. As a result, in the realm of aesthetic beauty, that is, with respect to the requirements of the intelligence-permeated sense, or with respect to what does not fit human senses, things divide into beautiful and ugly. It is with

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Maritain, Art and Scholasticism, p. 19.
respect to man, or to the intelligence-permeated sense, that things divide into these two categories.\textsuperscript{9}

Chesterton understood that the poet, in his commitment to beauty, was committed also to particular, material realities, and that the purpose of art is to create from them aesthetic beauty. In her introduction to \textit{The Coloured Lands}, Maisie Ward quotes him as saying:

> It is the sacred stubbornness of things, their mystery and their suggestive limits, their shape and special character, which makes all artistic thrift and thought. The adventure is not an all-transforming enchantment, it is rather the answering of a challenge; and one in which we have hardly the choice of weapons.\textsuperscript{10}

It is this wrestling with "the sacred stubbornness of things," in order to produce aesthetic beauty, that is art. The poet or artist begins with the particular object and working within the limits it imposes, harmonizing whatever in it is ugly, brings forth "a terrible beauty." Chesterton amplifies this idea thus:

> I am far from denying that a great poet might achieve a great turn of style, which would make something sublime out of a hat-peg or a dust-bin, as Shakespeare did out of a bodkin or a bung-hole. But if such passages be examined, it will be found that nowhere did the great poet study the grand style more subtly than when dealing with such mean objects.

\textsuperscript{9}Maritain, \textit{Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry}, p. 164.

Anyhow, he did not merely mention the mean objects, and then mention that they had filled him with feelings indescribable. He set out seriously to describe the indescribable. That is the whole business of literature, and it is a hard row to hoe.\textsuperscript{11}

There are further distinctions, however, to be made in this matter of what art is. G. K. was quoted in Chapter II as saying that "poetry is not a selection of the images which will express a particular thought; rather it is an analysis of the thoughts which are evoked by a certain image." In this statement four elements can be distinguished: the poet (understood), the objective reality, the final product or the poem, and the impulse in the poet which drives him to undertake the "analysis." This last, the impulse, is the raison d'etre of art. It rises from the depths of human nature in response to man's elemental awareness of himself and of all that is not himself. Says Chesterton:

Every human being has forgotten who he is and where he came from. We are all blasted with one great obliteration of memory. We none of us saw ourselves born; and if we had, it would not have cleared up the mystery. Parents are a delight; but they are not an explanation. The one thing that no man, however adventurous, can get behind, is his own existence; the one thing that no man, however learned, can ever know, is his own name. It is easier to comprehend the cosmos than to comprehend the ego; it is easier even to know where you are than to know who you are. We have forgotten our own meaning, and

\textsuperscript{11}G. K. Chesterton, \textit{All I Survey}, p. 112.
we are all wandering about the streets without keepers. All that we call commonsense and practicality and worldly wisdom only means that we forget that we have forgotten. All that we mean by religion and poetry only means that for one wild moment we remember that we forget.\textsuperscript{12}

In this magnificent passage, Chesterton's humanism is defined precisely in the supremacy of the person, the "ego," over the cosmos, and at the same time, its absolute humility in its longing for God, its source. The deepest impulses of this soul, this "ego," are those which spring from both these motives simultaneously—the impulses of religion and poetry. Moreover, it is to be understood that the artistic impulse comes from the inner being of the poet, evoked by objective reality and by a reality that might be, the work envisioned by the poet. Maritain calls this impulse creative intuition. He explains further: "his [the poet's] intuition, the creative intuition, is an obscure grasping of his own Self and of things in a knowledge through union or through connaturality which is born in the spiritual unconscious and which fructifies only in the work."\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13}Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, p. 115.
On the ontological level, this intuition is the form of the work of art; when it has been imposed on matter, the work of art achieves the perfection of being. And with that achievement of the perfection of being in the work of art, beauty appears; as St. Thomas says: "beauty . . . begins to exist as soon as the radiation of any form over a suitably proportioned matter succeeds in pleasing the intellect."14 "The abyss of light," the irradiation of form-on-matter is the intuitive goal, the aim of the artist, but its achievement is, as G. K. says, a "hard row to hoe," because it is a description of "the indescribable." The artist is one who is able to attempt the description.

From the following passage it is obvious that Chesterton fully understood the force of the creative impulse, or intuition, as the form of the work of art. He writes:

. . . there is a very real metaphysical meaning in the idea that light existed before the sun and stars. . . . The idea existed before any of the machinery which made manifest the idea. . . .

However this may be in the matter of religion and philosophy, it can be said with little exaggeration that this truth is the very key of literature. The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: that a thing constructed can

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only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists, as the mother can love the unborn child. In creative art the essence of a book exists before the book; the author enjoys it and lives in it with a kind of prophetic rapture. He wishes to write a comic story before he has thought of a single comic incident. He desires to write a sad story before he has thought of anything sad. He knows the atmosphere before he knows anything. . . . So the creative writer laughs at his comedy before he creates it, and he has tears for his tragedy before he knows what it is. When the symbols and the fulfilling facts do come to him, they come generally in a manner very fragmentary and inverted, mostly in irrational glimpses of crisis and consummation. The last page comes before the first; before his romance has begun, he knows that it has ended well. He sees the wedding before the wooing; he sees the colour and character of the whole story prior to any possible events in it. This is the real argument for art and style, only that artists and the stylists have not the sense to use it. In one very real sense style is far more important than either character or narrative. For a man knows what style of book he wants to write when he knows nothing else about it. 15

A final and extremely important fact about art in terms of aesthetic theory is that, while the poet truly creates, the work of art is not drawn from nothing. It exists in itself, but as a reflection of the realities that gave it being—the reality first impressed upon and experienced by the poet and the mind, emotions, and creative impulse of the poet as he works. The work of art is, in other words and again, a symbol, "a display, the

best expression of something that cannot otherwise be expressed," as G. K. has said. Art begins with man's remembering the mystery of his existence and that "things truly are, and we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real." What the artist produces is a glimpse "of the world when God saw that it was good." (Hence wonder, that quality of being startled by whatever is—"Having a nose is more comic even than having a Norman nose"16—which is so much insisted on by Chesterton; and also the element of praise that invariably accompanies it: "we shall know them for the Sons of God, when they are still shouting for joy.") That glimpse, of course, is unique, and exists in its own right, but at the same time it has "meaning," it represents something beyond itself. Thus, the more perfect the work of art, the more "the meaning fits the symbol and the symbol the meaning," the greater the artistic tension between the metaphoric elements.

This is so not only in the individual poem, where the "metaphor is the keystone of the arch," but also of literature as a whole. Chesterton again:

Every great literature has always been allegorical—allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The Iliad is only great because all life is a battle,

16G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 83.
the Odyssey because all life is a journey, The Book of Job because all life is a riddle. There is an attitude in which we think that all existence is summed up in the word "ghosts"; another, and somewhat better one, in which we think it is summed up in the words A Midsummer Night's Dream. Even the vulgarest melodrama or detective story can be good if it expresses something of the delight in sinister possibilities—the healthy lust for darkness and terror which may come on us any night in walking down a dark lane.17

And so Chesterton's symbolic view of literature again becomes apparent. It rests on the conviction that beauty, and therefore art (ultimately directed toward beauty), is a revelation of being, a revelation that "draws out the soul of things."

In summarizing this section on G. K.'s aesthetic theory it can be said that beginning with the fact of reality, the poet, according to Chesterton, concerns himself with that aspect of being called beauty. The distinction between transcendental and aesthetic beauty explains the artist's attention to particular, material reality, while the definition of transcendental beauty as the splendor formae indicates the ultimate purpose of art, the imposition of form on suitably proportioned matter. Ontologically, this form is the creative impulse of the artist, and it originates in the depths of his awareness of being. What he produces in the work of art,

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17G. K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 68.
therefore, is an expression of that awareness, and is a symbol both of his realization of some phase of being and of the reality itself. Thus Chesterton's insistence on a symbolic interpretation of literature—"every phase of literary art must be a symbol of some phase of the human spirit."

And so the unity of G. K.'s thought becomes apparent. In Chapter II his appreciation of the mystery of reality and then of symbol as a means to plumb that mystery was first discussed. For Chesterton this symbolic approach to reality—to "the soul of things"—is the way of the imagination: "Every true artist feel[s] . . . that there is something there; something behind the clouds or within the trees; . . . he believes that the pursuit of beauty is the way to find it; that imagination is a sort of incantation that can call it up."18 Here is Chesterton's way of saying—about being and beauty—what the Scholastics also say: that beauty is an aspect of being, metaphysically identical with it; that being does not appeal to the rational creature only as intelligible or as desirable—that is, as truth or goodness—but also as delightful, delighting the mind (by means of the intuition of the sense), with "a glittering

intelligibility,¹⁹ and producing "joy in knowledge, not the joy peculiar to the art of knowing, but a joy super-abounding and overflowing from such an act because of the object known"²⁰—the brilliance of its form.

Art is the conscious approach to being-as-beautiful. And the imagination, intuitively perceiving the likeness between falling embers, dashing gold-vermilion, and a windhover buckling before the wind, creates for the mind an approach to the formal brilliance of the windhover. The imagination is the "incantation" that "calls up" for the mind's delight this aspect of the bird's being.

But, again, the objective reality—the windhover's beauty—is not the sole concern of the artist. He is concerned also with his own expression of it, with the beauty of what he produces to represent that other beauty. And so, once more, the idea of symbol is seen to be pivotal in art, not in order to be factually representational, but rather to be "the best expression of what cannot otherwise be expressed," to be an expression that not only enhances the original but constitutes in

²⁰Maritain, Art and Scholasticism, p. 23.
itself a new "irradiation of form on matter." Maritain again on this point:

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\ldots \text{our art does not derive from itself alone what it imparts to things; it spreads over them a secret which it first discovered in them, in their invisible substance or in their endless exchanges and correspondences. Take it out of 'that blessed reality given once for all, in the center of which we are situated' [P. Claudel, "Introduction a un poème sur Dante," Correspondant, Sept. 10, 1921.], and it ceases to be. It transforms, removes, brings closer together, transfigures; it does not create. It is by the way in which he changes the shape of the universe passing through his mind, in order to make a form apprehended in things shine upon a matter, that the artist impresses his signature upon his work. He recomposes for each, according as the poetry in him changes him, a world more real than the reality offered to the senses.} \\]

Chesterton, of course, understood this transforming, transfiguring process called art. And he understood it in its widest, deepest aspects, as when he thought of the complexities of human existence passing through man's mind to be distilled into the forms of literature: "Every form of literary art must be a symbol of some phase of the human spirit." This paper has, I hope, made clear the classic quality of that statement.

\[21\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 74-75.\]
In this study I have attempted to present an exposition of the literary philosophy of G. K. Chesterton, and to point out that this phase of his work has been unjustly neglected. As a literary critic he himself admitted that he "never took trouble"—even to telephone G. B. Shaw to verify the "facts" he records in his biography of the playwright. Nevertheless, few critics have so well understood the deeper aspects of literature: what kind of thing it is, its relation to man's existence and to reality as a whole, its exact concern with beauty, its aim and method.

Chesterton did understand these things, and his thought on the matter ought to be of much use to contemporary critics. To Catholic critics, who have Scholastic philosophy on which to base their discussions of literary values, he offers a keen appreciation of the imagination—an antidote to their sometimes too cerebral and/or moralistic approaches.

For other critics, especially those who are overwhelmed by the claims of science and who can, therefore, see no intrinsic value in literature, he can point out the weaknesses of their philosophic premises. To them he offers the solid metaphysical foundation of
Scholasticism, on which to base both human and artistic values. It is, par excellence, a "sterner, cognitive theory" which, "talking about real right and wrong, real beauty and ugliness," sustains value and "makes response to value possible."

Chesterton's intuitive grasp of the truths of Scholasticism flowered into a literary philosophy that is eminently sane and well balanced. That it is a fit tool for contemporary critics is the argument of this paper.
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