THE BALLAD OF THE WHITE HORSE

A TWENTIETH CENTURY POEM BUILT ON AN ANCIENT FORMULA

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INTRODUCTION

This paper undertakes to study *The Ballad of the White Horse* as an excellent modern imitation of the old folk ballad whose primitive spirit Chesterton recaptures through his exultant Christianity. It attempts to show that the transcendence of *The Ballad of the White Horse* over most ballad poetry lies in the sublimity of its theme — the triumph of Christianity over paganism.

There are two kinds of ballads, the folk and the literary. The folk or popular ballad belongs to the childhood of literature. Theodore Maynard says, "The ballad is poetry as an infant, and is full of a charm that maturity cannot hope to regain."  

The literary type, on the other hand, is an imitation of the original ballad. Few of these poems catch the direct simplicity and primitive strength of the early tales. In polished style a modern writer attempts to present a narrative; frequently he uses extensive detail in its telling. Coleridge in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Chesterton in *The Ballad of the White Horse* have perhaps come nearer than have other poets to recapturing this atmosphere.

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The popular or folk ballad, according to Francis B. Gummere,

is a narrative poem without any known author or any marks of individual authorship such as sentiment and reflection, meant, in the first instance, for singing, and connected, as its name implies, with the communal dance, but submitted to a process of oral tradition among people free from literary influences and fairly homogeneous.\(^2\)

The ballad, then, belongs to the folk. It is "stark, primitive stuff" dealing with elemental human emotions. Its themes are heroic, often tragic, for it looks fearlessly at life. It treats of the supernatural -- "Sweet William's Ghost"; of love and romance -- "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet"; of battle and outlawry -- "Otterburn" and "Chevy Chase"; of adventure -- "Robin Hood and Little John"; of tragic death -- "The Twa Sisters" and "Sir Patrick Spens."

The determining characteristics of the folk ballad as a type are: objectivity, metrical form, and style. Emotionally the ballad is impersonal, objective. The bare narrative, picturing the deeds of kings and queens or of other persons of outstanding character, has its tenseness augmented by terse, compressed expression. Its movement


is swift, direct, decisive. Without preliminaries the story hurtles onward, gathering force by what it fails to say, rather than by actual statement. There is heart-rending suspense; there is sudden, terrifying climax; but there is no reflective after-thought; nowhere is the ballad personal, subjective. "Edward" and "The Twa Corbies" illustrate this dramatic effect.

There is seldom any introduction: we plunge at once into the midst of the action. The stanzas leap from peak to peak of the narrative, with no attempt to supply the less important links, yet seldom with any real sacrifice of clearness. The events in the uncontaminated ballad are unmoralized and unsentimentalized; the bald fact is left without comment or criticism from the singer.4

Simplicity characterized the metrical form of the ballad. Originally the stanza consisted of two rhyming lines of seven iambic feet; more often, however, these were broken into the four-line stanza in which lines one and three are unrhymed iambic tetrameter and two and four, rhymed trimeter. Variations and irregularities of meter are frequent. Alliteration, internal rhyme, dialogue, parallelism, refrain, and incremental repetition appear in almost every ballad. Of folk ballad structure "Sir Patrick Spens" is an excellent model, --

He hadna gane a step, a step,
A step, but barely ane,
When a bout flew out our goodly ship,
And the salt sea it came in.5

The style of the popular ballad is marked by rugged, elemental strength. Its diction springs spontaneously from close contact with primitive peoples. In spare, homely manner it artlessly voices their sturdy vitality. Conventional words and phrases occur often; every word is turned to account, yet the effect is one of unstudied artistry for the ballads are "the unconscious flowerings of poetry from the common heart of man." 6

The folk ballad is, therefore, a bold tale of fresh simplicity and vigor, sprung from the very lives of the people. Its themes deal with elemental, usually tragic, emotions. Impersonal in tone it affects its hearers through impressions rather than by expression. Iambic meter, often varied and irregular, swings along through the four-line stanzas. Alliteration, refrain, incremental repetition mark its structure. Strong, homespun words and phrases give primitive flavor to its frank, spontaneous style.


The literary ballad, on the other hand, has a known author and is written more or less in imitation of the folk ballad, but with more details and in a more studied literary style. Ballads of today are not merely simple narratives without any symbolic meaning; they are artistic tales, in conception grand and in execution perfect, and are frequently of an exceedingly high order. Examples of good literary ballads are Scott's "Lochinvar," Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

To the literary ballads named in the above quotation should be added "The Highwayman" by Noyes and Masefield's "The Yarn of 'Loch Achray'". The former is a fine example of the polished literary ballad; the latter imitates more closely the ancient type.

Of modern ballads "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is probably one of the nearest to the folk ballads. Its narrative by swift movement and compressed emotion holds the reader in its tragic grip.

The sun's rim dips; the stars rush out;
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark.


Iambic meter, varied by trochaic and anapestic feet, produces the irregular effects characteristic of the primitive songs. Its dominant four-line stanza is frequently prolonged to secure force or speed. Alliteration, internal rhyme, repetition of word and phrase are frequent. Short, strong words and unadorned phrases recall the homely diction of the primitive ballads.

As stated above, this thesis is a study of The Ballad of the White Horse as an excellent imitation of the popular ballad. It attempts to show that Chesterton recaptures the primitive spirit of the folk ballad through his exultant Christianity and that by this same quality he causes his ballad to transcend its model. The investigation is made by considering The Ballad of the White Horse under the following aspects:

- Its narrative is typical of ballad poetry.
- Its form is characteristic of this type.
- Its style combines the manner of the old and the literary ballads; its subjectivity is perhaps obtrusive, but yet does not destroy the ballad quality.

The theme of The Ballad of the White Horse is the triumph of Christianity over paganism. Aglow with that faith and joy and love distinctive of the true followers of Christ, King Alfred challenges the pagan invaders to decisive conflict. With troops depleted, impoverished of all except undying faith in Christ's cause, he charges
onward exultantly. His battle cry is "Christ and Christian civilization!"

The poem is the more powerful and appealing because its theme is applicable to the individual soul as well as to the nation established by Alfred's courage and ability. The kingdom of God is won by violence. He who would save his life must lose it for Christ and His cause. In reality the conquest of self is the triumph of Christianity over paganism.

In its theme -- the triumph of Christianity over paganism -- lies the true excellence of the poem. Chesterton's exultant Christianity invests Alfred with a splendor more potent than volumes of carefully studied facts to convey the impression of his greatness. The ballad is a canticle; Chesterton's is the singing heart. It is this rugged joy in the cause of Christ that lends to the poem the primitive spirit of the early folk epic.
CHAPTER I

THE NARRATIVE

In The Ballad of the White Horse Chesterton synthesizes, as only a poet can, fact and legend surrounding King Alfred. He presents a series of factual and legendary episodes which center around the victory of Alfred over the Danes in the White Horse Vale. In the mellow light of other days he blends history and legend to portray a national hero, his deeds of valor, and the scene of his triumphs. Each exploit is animated by sturdy Christian joy in an apparently hopeless cause. Chesterton divides the narrative into eight books which, briefly outlined, are as follows.

Book I The Vision of the King

Alfred, harassed on every side, "broken to his knee" by the Danish hordes, has hidden on the little island of Athelney. There the Mother of God appears to him. In reply to his question whether he will be able to drive out the foe, Mary assures Alfred of God's aid in the struggle against the pagan barbarians.

**Book II The Gathering of the Chiefs**

Acting upon the commission given him by Our Lady and in her name Alfred gathers his chieftains: Eldred the Saxon; Mark the Roman; Colan the Celt. Leaders of peoples who had contributed to the civilization and culture of Britain, these chiefs muster at Alfred's call "the few that were alive to die."(22)

**Book III The Harp of Alfred**

As a wandering minstrel Alfred visits the enemy's camp. The poet here introduces his theme of contrast between the joylessness of paganism in spite of its triumphs and the joyousness of Christianity despite its sufferings and apparent failure. The Danish chieftains take Alfred's harp and sing in turn their prowess, their triumphs, their utter weariness because paganism is meaningless. Alfred answers them in an exultant Christian song.

**Book IV The Woman in the Forest**

Chesterton, in the incident of the woman and the cakes, recounts a moral victory for Alfred. Striking him with a burning cake the woman of the forest brands his kingly brow with a "scarlet star."(77) Alfred is dumb-founded.
And torture stood and the evil things
That are in the childish hearts of kings
An instant in his eyes.  

Humility vanquishes pride, however. Acknowledging that
he is but an unworthy servant, having "Failed in a little
thing,"(84) Alfred makes the scar the battle ensign of the
Christian troops.

Book V Ethandune: The First Stroke

Christian and pagan forces confront each other at
Ethandune. "Christ's few were grim and grey"(92); the Danish
hosts, numerous and well-armed. Colan sends his sword hur-
tling through the air and cuts down Harold, Guthrum's nephew.
Thus he strikes the first blow and opens the battle "with
the throwing of the sword."(108)

Book VI Ethandune: The Slaying of the Chiefs

Eldred, after having hewn down great numbers of the
Danes, is killed by Elf's magic seventh spear. Mark and
Elf fight hand to hand; the Roman triumphs "And the songs
of Elf were done."(119) Mark in turn is killed by Ógier.
The Christian forces are routed; Alfred's followers are
driven along one fork of the "clovenways"(68); Colan's
dash headlong down the other path, whence the Celtic
chieftain's death cry comes but faintly to the ears of his king.

**Book VII Ethandune: The Last Charge**

Alfred rallies his fleeing soldiers -- "Stood firm that feeble line." (141) The pagan hordes are astounded at this final onslaught. Troops they deemed vanquished charge anew with

...fury deeper than deep fear;
And smiles as sour as brine. 11

At "The high tide and the turn" (147) of the desperate onset Our Lady appears above the hosts; the banner of paganism, Odin's Raven, is rent; and Guthrum, acknowledging the power of Christianity, asks to be baptized.

**Book VIII The Scouring of the Horse**

Alfred in a vision beholds the return of the pagans.

"They shall not come with warships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands." 12

He intimates that continual vigilance and effort are imperative for the purification of the nation as well as

11. 141.
12. 174.
of the individual, just as continual vigilance and effort are necessary to keep the White Horse free from weeds and grass.

This, in brief, is the tale Chesterton sings in *The Ballad of the White Horse*. The episodes like those of folk ballads concern Alfred, England's king, about whom fact and legend have shed a national halo. The account which follows presents the poet's use of history and tradition in his portrayal of the heroic deeds of Alfred during the Danish invasions.

Alfred the Great ruled Wessex (practically all southern England of today) from 871 to 901. An able military leader, he had with his brother Ethelred encountered the Danes in 871 in nine successive battles, six of which — Englefield, Reading, Ashdown, Basing, Marden, and Wilton — are named in the Chronicle. Upon his accession to the throne in 871 Alfred united his scattered forces, and after a series of victories and defeats, finally subjugated the invaders at Edington in 878. Guthrum, the Danish king, and about thirty of his lords became Christians.

Alfred then devoted himself to his realm, furthering its religious, intellectual, and political advancement.


Particularly was he a patron of learning. Gathering about him the leading scholars of the day he translated, or caused to be translated, the important Latin works of his age. Gregory's Pastoral Care, Crosius, Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and Boethius are among the books Alfred converted into Anglo-Saxon for his people. Most significant perhaps was his compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Up to that time records of national events had been kept in various monasteries. Alfred was inspired to collect these documents and to integrate them into the first national history of England.

The Alfred of Chesterton's ballad is a composite of history and legend. Chesterton portrays the true Alfred -- a great leader, a national hero, a stalwart Christian. From St. Neot he embodies the legendary Alfred of the burned cakes, and the allusion to Alfred's dissolute youth; from William of Malmesbury he depicts Alfred, the wandering minstrel.

16. Ibid., 947.
17. L. C. Jane, op. cit., 38.
That the mere historical figure is not the Alfred Chesterton intended to present is apparent from the preface to the ballad. "King Alfred is a legend in this broader and more human sense, that the legends are the most important things about him." (v) And elsewhere, alluding to Alfred, he says:

Fable is, generally speaking, far more accurate than fact, for fable describes a man as he was to his own age; fact describes him as he is to a handful of inconsiderate antiquarians many centuries after....Fable is more historical than fact, because fact tells us about one man and fable tells us about a million men. 19

Chesterton builds up the story of his ballad around the victory of Alfred in the White Horse Vale. In this Berkshire valley the highest elevation is White Horse Hill, so called because along its northern slope is carved the figure of a horse 374 feet in length. Legend surrounds the origin of this ancient monument which is thought to have been cut there on the white chalk hillside before the arrival of the Romans.

In regard to the origin of this famous horse one Thomas Baskerville, Esquire, of Bayworth (1630 to 1720) writes to the Reverend Mr. Francis Wise, an antiquarian


of the eighteenth century, stating the opinion of his father, Hannibal Baskerville of Brazen College, Oxford:

"As touching the original of this eminent Landmark, which gives its name to one of the best vales of England; I heard my Father say, who was a man well read in Antiquityes, that he thought it was Hengist, the Saxon conqueror, who in remembrance of his exploits, this being his Armes or Crest to them, caused this figure to be cut here. This Hengist came into England A.D. 450 being sent for by Vortiger, to assist him in his warres."21

Mr. Wise himself describes the Berkshire monument, attributing the figure to King Alfred's victory over the Danes at the battle of Ashdown in 871. He acknowledges, however, that the horse was the standard of the first Saxons who came to England.

After this manner our horse is formed, on the side of an high and steep hill, facing the North west. His dimensions are extended over an acre of ground, or thereabouts; his Head, Neck, Body, and Tail, consist of one white line; as does also each of his Four Legs. This is done by cutting a trench into the chalk, of about two or three feet deep, and about ten feet broad. The Chalk of the trench being of a brighter colour, than the turf which surrounds it, the rays of the afternoon's Sun darting upon it make the whole figure visible for ten or a dozen, nay fifteen miles, if I am rightly informed.22

If ever the genius of K. Alfred exerted itself, (and it never failed him in his greatest exigencies) it did remarkably so, upon the account of

22. Ibid., 24.
this trophy. The situation of his affairs would not permit him to spend much time, nor his circumstances much cost, in effecting one. His troops, though victorious, were harassed, and diminished by continual duty; nor did the country afford, to any man's thinking, materials proper for a work of this kind. Though he had not therefore the opportunity of raising, like other conquerors, a stupendous monument of Brass, or Marble, yet he had shewn an admirable contrivance, in erecting One, magnificent enough, tho' simple in its design, executed too with labour and no expense, that may hereafter vie with the Pyramids for duration, and perhaps exist when those shall be no more.

No one can be ignorant, that the Horse was the Standard which the Saxons used, both before and after their coming hither. This is so well known and allowed, that the very names of the two first Saxon Leaders, are supposed by Bp Nicholson, not to be proper, but typical or emblematical only: and that as the Emperor of Germany is sometimes stiled "The Eagle," and the King of France "The Lilly," from the Arms they bear; so these were stiled "Horses," from their Banner. For HENGST in Saxon signifies, no more than a "Stonehorse," and HORSA need not be explained to an English reader. 23

As is evident throughout the ballad, Chesterton ascribes the horse upon the hill to an age before Alfred's time. To quote two or three of the most convincing of these allusions to the antiquity and doubtful origin of the White Horse --

And as he went by the White Horse Vale
He saw lie wan and wide
The old horse graven, God knows when,
By gods or beasts or what things then
Walked a new world instead of men
And scrawled on the hill-side.24

.......

"All things achieved and chosen pass,
As the White Horse fades in the grass,
No work of Christian men.

"Ere the sad gods that made your gods,
Saw their sad sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale,
That you have left to darken and fail,
Was cut out of the grass."

.......

"But because it is only Christian men
Guard even heathen things."25

Because parts of the grass about the Horse gradually loosened and fell, and after a time turf crept over the white figure, a custom of "Scouring the White Horse" came into vogue. The folk of the country-side gathered at stated intervals to scour the Horse; before long the event assumed a festive turn and feats of skill and manly sport commemorated the ancient victory. At one period it seems to have been obligatory upon the landowners of the Berkshire district to provide for the regular scouring of the White Horse.

The supplies which nature is continually affording, occasion the turf on the upper verge of his body, for want of continuity, to crumble, and fall off into the white trench, which in many years

24. 43.
25. 66.
time produces small specks of turf, and not a little obscures the brightness of the Horse. Though there is no danger from hence of the whole figure being obliterated; yet the neighboring inhabitants have a custom of "Scouring the Horse," as they call it; at which time a solemn festival is celebrated, and manlike games with prizes exhibited, which no doubt had their original in the Saxon time, in memory of the victory. 26

In The Scouring of the White Horse by Thomas Hughes, published in 1859, this festival is described at length. Hughes remarks that the custom was an old one in Mr. Wise's time, 1758. He lists twelve occasions between 1755 and 1857 on which the scourings occurred and on which community games and sports marked the celebration.

Chesterton incorporates into his ballad the "Scouring of the White Horse." He speaks of Alfred's cautioning his subjects to keep the White Horse clean.

He bade them keep the White Horse white
As the first plume of the snows. 28

To Chesterton, the White Horse, the old Saxon emblem, is a symbol of the Commonweal. The energetic vigilance exerted to keep the chalky figure clean and white is synonymous with that necessary to protect the State and maintain its integrity.


27. Thomas Hughes, The Scouring of the White Horse: or a Long Vacation Ramble of a London Clerk, 131-142.

28. 166.
From the above consideration it is apparent that in its narrative *The Ballad of the White Horse* is akin to the folk ballads. The tale is a simple, direct one recounting the marvelous deeds of a national hero. It moves rapidly, depicting the untamed human passions of elemental races. Violence, hate, stoic acceptance of death signalize the pagan chieftains; unswerving loyalty to their king and to Christ impel Alfred's followers to unrivaled daring and heroism.

It is true Chesterton does forsake the objectivity of the primitive tales as in Book IV, "The Woman in the Forest," and particularly, in Book VIII, "The Scouring of the Horse," where he departs from the ballad tradition and becomes reflective and philosophical. Yet so vital to the whole ballad is its theme of Christian victory that a ruddy glow seems to permeate specific incidents of the narrative and by its ardent flame color them unaware.
CHAPTER II

METRICAL FORM AND TONE COLOR

The metrical form of the folk ballad is simple, adapted to easy memorization and ready transmission by word of mouth. Chesterton has built The Ballad of the White Horse according to the early stanza pattern -- a quatrain in which lines one and three are unrhymed iambic tetrameter and lines two and four, rhymed trimeter.

Though it is true that many early ballad stanzas are made thus, yet because the ballad belongs to a primitive age when men's passions were untamed and their deeds violent, variety and irregularity are apparent in its structure.

Speaking of this lack of uniformity Lafcadio Hearn remarks:

> Although the majority of ballads take certain forms, many do not; and it would not be correct to say that a poem is not a ballad because it happens to be in one kind of verse rather than another.29

Pritchard in his definition of the ballad aptly accounts for these irregularities.

> The ballad is a simple, artless tale of daring exploits and marvelous escapes. It gives a whiff of the open air and tells of a time when life was rude and unrestrained....it has the jerkiness of water that can not come fast enough out of a bottle. The old writer told his tale as a child.

29. Lafcadio Hearn, Interpretations of Literature, II, 104.
tells it. There is the same reckless abandon, indifference to rule, inconsequent mingling of omissions with repetitions, and, above all, breakneck speed. Chesterton adopts this irregularity characteristic of the ancient poems. He uses the quatrain, but also varies his stanza from four lines to five and six and, on a few occasions, to seven lines. A study of the variation in stanza length seems to indicate no definite plan of sequence. Dividing his ballad into eight books he presents specific episodes in Alfred's victory over paganism. In each book stanzas of four, five, and six lines follow one another with great irregularity.

When the power of emotion carries him away, as when he depicts a battle at its zenith, or when he is swept along by the force of his narrative, Chesterton often uses the longer stanza. Book Six, "Ethandune: The Slaying of the Chiefs," affords an illustration of stanzas lengthened by stirring emotion.

And midmost of the rolling field
Ran Ogier ragingly,
Lashing at Mark, who turned his blow,
And brake the helm about his brow,
And broke him to his knee.

Then Ogier heaved over his head
His huge round shield of proof;
But Mark set one foot on the shield,
One on some sundered rock upheeled,
And towered above the tossing field,
A statue on a roof.31

31. 121.
Here in the heat of battle the five-line stanza quickens into six as it leads to Mark's triumph over Ogier.

An instance in which the force of the narrative naturally increases the number of lines is found in Book Four, "The Woman in the Forest."

Screaming, the woman caught a cake Yet burning from the bar, And struck him suddenly on the face, Leaving a scarlet star.

King Alfred stood up wordless, A man dead with surprise, And torture stood and evil things That are in the childish hearts of kings An instant in his eyes.

And even as he stood and stared Drew round him in the dusk Those friends creeping from far-off farms, Marcus with all his slaves in arms And the strange spears hung with ancient charms Of Colan of the Usk.32

The first stanza quoted is a powerful quatrain. The angry woman acts instantly, decisively. In the second stanza lines one and two reveal Alfred's mighty astonishment, while the three additional lines expand the first two by defining the king's agony. Stanza three in six lines narrates the measured approach of Alfred's chieftains with their armies.

Instances similar to these quoted, in which strong emotion or the narrative's sweep carry over into six lines, are numerous. However, these factors can be no means ac-
count for all irregularities in stanza length. It would seem best to conclude that in making the ballad form reflect and convey the abounding vitality and recklessness of the age it depicts, Chesterton uses great variety and follows no well-marked plan. His stanza pattern cavorts according to his theme and mood.

Chesterton chooses the iambic meter dominant in the early ballad stanza, but varies it according to the character of his thought. Frequently he lightens or quickens his rhythm by inserting an anapestic measure. Again when the movement is ponderous or solemn, he employs a trochee or, at the beginning of a line or after the caesural pause, a spondee.

As a stanza of pure iambic meter the following is an example:

They bred like birds in English woods,
They rooted like the rose,
When Alfred came to Athelney
To hide him from their bows. 33

More often the anapest is found mingled with the regular iambus.

And the cry of the palms and the purple moons,
Or the cry of the frost and foam,
Swept ever around an inmost place,
And the din of distant race on race
Cried and replied round Rome. 34

33. 8.
34. 5.
"Cried" in the last line is an example of an introductory long beat.

Instances in which long beats follow upon one another may be seen in these lines.

Sings over White Horse Down (133)
When the broken shield hung on the breast
And the hopeless horn blown. (143)

"The high tide!" King Alfred cried. (147)

These recognized changes of meter have the same purpose as changes in stanza form. They are organic in the poem, adapted to the word and spirit of the ballad; they reproduce that direct, unstudied appeal to deep emotions common to humanity.

In his quatrains Chesterton uses the regular ballad rhyme, abcb, and on the whole his rhymes are good. More often than not he employs a masculine, consonantal rhyme which gives simplicity and strength to his verse.

Their souls were drifting as the sea,
And all good towns and lands
They only saw with heavy eyes,
And broke with heavy hands.35

His five-line stanzas rhyme, abccb; his six, abcccd; the two seven line stanzas, the only ones in the entire ballad, follow the scheme, abcccd. Though occa-
sionally he is guilty of a faulty rhyme, he sets his pat-tern aside only once in the entire ballad. In this abcb gives way to abcc.

Short time had shaggy Ogier
To pull his lance in line —
He knew King Alfred's axe on high,
    He heard it rushing through the sky.36

Throughout the poem as a whole the rhymes are strong, ex-pressive of primitive vigor.

Now and again Chesterton employs faulty rhymes. Of these "blood, wood" (7); "home, come" (157); "brow, show" (84); "war, far" (99); or "war, star" (xvii) are examples. Yet throughout the ballad imperfect rhymes are a decided minority.

From this consideration of the stanza length, rhythmic pattern, and rhyme scheme, and the irregularities particularly in the first two of these, it appears that Chesterton brings to his narrative the freshness and spontaneity of the ancient ballad. All is an expression of childlike enthusiasm and directness intent on telling events simply and rapidly.

In the old ballad the refrain is important. At times it takes the form of dialogue and carries the story forward.

36. 145.
'0 Where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son? And where ha you been, my handsome young man?'
'I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon.
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.'
'An wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son? And wha met you there, my handsome young man?'
'O I met wi my true-love; mother make my bed soon.
For I'm wearied wi huntin, and fain wad lie down.'

Again, the refrain bears no relation to the narrative.

There were two sisters, they went playing,
With a lie downe downe a downe-a
To see their father's shipe come sayling in.
With a hy downe downe a downe-a.

Of this latter type of repetition Teter writes:

These refrains serve to bind the whole together as well as to unify the people who are singing. Persons who do not know the stanzas will eagerly await the refrain, or chorus, and when it comes will join in lustily.

Neither of these devices of repetition does Chesterton employ, yet he secures the effect of the old refrain by the use of "return" -- repetition verbatim, or with the change of but a word or two, of lines he has already used.

Before the gods that made the gods
Had seen their sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was cut out of the grass.

38. Ibid., 126.
Before the gods that made the gods
    Had drunk at dawn their fill,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
    Was hoary on the hill.40

As he went down to the river-hut
    He knew a night-shade scent,
Owls did as evil cherubs rise,
    With little wings and lantern eyes,
As though he sank through under-skies;
    But down and down he went.

As he went down to the river-hut
    He went as one that fell;

For he must meet by the river-hut
    Them he had bidden to arm,41

In this wise the ballad swings onward. As the repeated words and lines fall familiarly upon the ear, the reader's pulse throbs rhythmically with the recognized phrases. Emotionally he is one with the ballad singer.

Tone Color

Folk ballads were transmitted orally; their direct appeal was through the ear. Tone color, or the blending of vowel and consonant sounds to procure desired musical or discordant effects, is, therefore, a matter worthy of consideration since it aids in recapturing the freshness and buoyancy of the primitive tales.

Alliteration, or the repetition of consonants at the beginning of or within words, is one means of effecting
tone color. The recurrence of harsh or explosive sounds formed by combinations of sibilants and gutturals—cacophony—creates the impression of discord or conflict, and evokes the very atmosphere of battle. Chesterton, as might be expected from his temperament, is skilled in producing these strident effects.

But hate in the buried Ogier
   Was strong as pain in hell,
   With bare brute hand from the inside
   He burst the shield of brass and hide,
   And a death-stroke to the Roman's side
   Sent suddenly and well.42


An instance of cacophony is to be noted in the ensuing lines.

"Grip, Wulf and Gorlias, grip the ash!
Slaves, and I make you free!
Stamp, Hildred hard in English land,
Stand, Gurth, Stand Gorlias, Gawen stand!
Hold, Halfgar, with the other hand,
   Halmer, hold up on knee!"43


42. 122.
43. 116.
Both these devices for producing tone color -- alliteration and cacophony -- are employed with skill. They convey the tenseness of a critical moment, yet do not strain after effect at the expense of thought.

Results directly opposite in tone color from the harsh sounds just considered derive from alliteration of "m," "n," and "l." Peace and calm permeate the atmosphere they create.

Under the old night's nodding hood (19)

Then silence sank. And slowly
Arose the sea-land lord (26)

The repetition of similar vowel sounds, particularly in accented syllables -- assonance -- is another device by which Chesterton secures tone color. His description of Mark, revolving Alfred's message pro and con, as he gazes over his orchards at sunrise is an excellent illustration.

Long looked the Roman on the land;
The trees as golden crowns
Blazed, drenched with dawn and dew-empearled,
While faintlier coloured, freshlier curled,
The clouds from underneath the world
Stood up over the downs.44

Here the dominance of mellow vowels, long "o's" and "a's" and "e's" and of the consonants, "l's" and "m's," together with the repression of harsh consonants, produces
a sound effect in pleasing harmony with the picture portrayed in the lines. The long vowels have, moreover, a retarding effect upon the rhythmic movement which thus adapts itself to the contemplative mood of the stanza.

Tone color may also be secured by onomatopoeia, the adaptation of sound to sense. Naturally this age-old custom asserts itself in the folk ballad. Chesterton resorts to it frequently. The stanza which records Alfred's angry resentment toward the chieftains because of their pagan philosophy is one case in point.

He heaved the head of the harp on high
And swept the framework barred,
And his stroke had all the rattle and spark
Of horses flying hard.45

The words "rattle and spark" approximate the sound of horses racing madly away, and their resounding force expresses the might of Alfred's indignation. Other examples are:

Dealing blows about the fight,
Like thunder-bolts a-roam,46

Flying, as when a juggler flings
A whizzing plate in play47

Where the tortured trumpets scream aloud (xv)

45. 61.
46. 121.
47. 123.
Word artistry is a further element of poetic beauty. The true poet so chooses his words that their literal meanings are heightened by the associations they evoke. Chesterton by his simple, direct diction recaptures the flavor of the folk ballad. His poetic gift creates imagery to delight and stimulate the reader as did the ballad singers of Alfred's reign. Good diction

should derive from the common speech of the time and yet be a heightened idiomatic form of that speech, achieving from the emotional pressure of poetry a new dignity and beauty.48

The body is the envelope of the spirit, and yet somehow it reflects the spirit. The soul, in a sense, creates the body. Chesterton is aflame with zeal for Christ's cause. Exultation over the apparently hopeless victory is the color-tone of his ballad. For him words are not potent enough. He surcharges them to voice his triumphant canticle.

"The Mother of God goes over them,
On dreadful cherubs borne;
And the psalm is roaring above the rune,
And the Cross goes over the sun and moon,
Endeth the battle of Ethandune
With the blowing of a horn."49

The stanza is one of power. Mary appears when the highest hope of the Christians is a forlorn hope.

49. 148.
"Dreadful cherubs" grips the reader by its almost ironic contradiction. Unfortunately, through the sentimentalization of some artists "cherub" is associated with childhood's beauty and innocence; "dreadful" inspires fear and awe. The combination startles by its unexpected force. The "psalm," a hymn of praise, "roars" over the "rune." Presumably "rune" is here a pagan war song. The "Cross goes over the sun and moon" is the poet's happy expression of Christianity's triumph over natural religions.

The investigation made in this chapter leads to but one conclusion — in metrical form and tone color The Ballad of the White Horse equals the best of the older ballads. Chesterton takes the typical ballad stanza with the characteristic meter and rhyme, but so transmutes it that artlessly it mirrors, clear-cut and unimpaired, the triumph of the Cross. With truly poetic intuition he entrusts to his full heart the tone harmonies of his canticle. Thus Chesterton's exultant Christianity, the theme of his ballad and its vivifying principle, gleams through a rich fabric spun of metrical form and tone color unrivaled by any of the folk ballads.
CHAPTER III

STYLE

"Imaging is in itself the very height and life of poetry."

Imagery may be defined as the "mental reproduction, without external stimulus except through words, of things seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled."

From his experiences and from the recollection of things seen, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled, the poet seizes upon a similarity between two objects which to the ordinary observer may possess little or nothing in common. The beauty of imagery is not inherent in individual images, but rather in their interrelation. They maintain their entity, yet it is their interplay which creates the emotional quality of the poem.

The personality of the poet, which is the well-spring of his poetry, is fed by innumerable streams and channels of consciousness: by all that he has lived and suffered and enjoyed; all that he has observed and experienced by his senses; all that he has read of other men's creation and which has become part of his own being; all that he has reasoned and speculated.


51. Blair and Chandler, editors, Approaches to Poetry, 19.
upon. His poetry will be a world created from all that he has known and felt and seen and heard and thought, and his image-making poetic faculty, his 'imagination', will blend together his memories and his immediate perceptions into a thousand varieties of shapes and associations of living loveliness and power . . .

But the simple, straightforward illustration of the quality of one thing by likening it to another is a very small corner of the poet's use of imagery, and in its more subtle and intricate forms the image becomes, not a mere comment on, or illustration of the poet's theme - a trimming to it, as it were - but woven into its very texture, as the image of discovery and exploration was woven into the texture of Keats's experience of reading Homer . . . 52

Folk ballads spring up close to human life. Their imagery, chosen from the daily life of the common people, is simple, spare, direct. Often it is crude in its exactness and artless in its candor. It implies rather than expresses emotion. Figures of speech are rare.

The diction of the ballad is strong with elemental realism. Because the narrative must stride ahead rapidly, words may not impede its progress. A word of one syllable is generally preferable to one of two. Vividness and strength mark the terse expressions which clothe compressed emotion.

Objectivity is characteristic of the primitive ballad. Its daring tale speeds on with breathless suspense toward the climax. When that tragic blow falls, no comment,

no reflection is cast upon it.

In The Ballad of the White Horse, on the other hand, subjectivity is perhaps obtrusive. This is particularly true of the closing book, "The Scouring of the Horse." Here Chesterton permits Alfred in his declining years to philosophize, especially about the return of the pagans in future times.

"When is great talk of trend and tide,
And wisdom and destiny,
Hail that undying heathen
That is sadder than the sea.

"In what wise men shall smite him,
Or the Cross stand up again,
Or charity or chivalry,
My vision saith not;"53

In places the meaning of the king's reflection is enigmatic, abstruse. This, too, is a divergence from the direct simplicity of folk ballad.

"Not with humor of hunters,
Or savage skill in war,
But ordering all things with dead words,
Strings shall they make of beasts and birds,
And wheels of wind and star."54

Yet, for all the apparent transgression of the old ballad canons in regard to objectivity, the poem loses none of the racy flavor of the primitive tales. Rather by this very subjectivity Chesterton vitalizes his ballad with

53. 177-78.
54. 174.
the fire of his radiant Christianity.

Directness and simplicity mark the style of the folk ballad. Imagery plays an important role in creating its primitive atmosphere. The Ballad of the White Horse has the early ballad characteristics, but Chesterton makes greater use of imagery than did the older ballad writers. The present chapter attempts to show that Chesterton's imagery combines the manner of the primitive and of the literary ballad. It studies his tendency to employ similes and, contrary to the fashion of the old folk singers, striking metaphors, accentuated often by grotesque hyperbole. It notes, too, the realistic tones of his color words and recognizes the poet's originality, violence, and power.

In The Ballad of the White Horse Chesterton sings the triumph of Christianity over paganism. Joyfully he revels in the victory of the Cross. His imagery reflects his exultation and the temper of the people and of the period he portrays. Wrought up by the moral, civic, and cultural values at stake in the fight, Chesterton through his powerful imagery graphically conveys the mighty import of the ideals he sets forth in the ballad. The poem is profuse with concrete words and phrases expressive of Christian virtue and valor, of the blindness of paganism, the glamour of war, the triumph of the Cross.

Chesterton depicts early peoples, elemental
passions, and homely scenes in rough-hewn words and rugged phrases. He is not one of those artists who with delicate touch blend the hues and tints of a frail tracery. Seizing the medium ready at his hand, he paints in great splashes, as it were, in which nature mirrors the moral strength he aims to visualize. Neither is he one of those sculptors who chisel here, round off there, and polish with finesse; rather he hews out massive, crag-like words to convey powerful emotion.

Adroitly Chesterton unites simile and metaphor, traits of the literary ballad, with strong Saxon monosyllabic alliterative words of the old ballads. The following stanza descriptive of the tremendous force and motion of an assault illustrates his skill.

Then bursting all and blasting
Came Christendom like death,
Kicked of such catapults of will,
The staves shiver, the barrels spill,
The waggons waver and crash and kill
The waggoners beneath.55

"Came Christendom," that is, the aggregate of all things Christian, all Wessex still saved from paganism's fire and pillage; "like death" -- here is a mighty simile. Alfred's army like death takes one by surprise; it is irresistible; "bursting all" -- ease, pleasure, wealth,

55. 146.
fame -- all fragile bubbles; "blasting" relentlessly it
casts up and then breaks to powder things obdurate -- the
passions of lust, pride, and hate. The metaphor, "cata-
pults of will," awes one with its picture of a powerful
military engine hurrying en masse humanity's greatest force,
its will, into final battle for Christianity in Wessex.
Throughout the remaining lines the onomatopoetic "staves
shiver," "barrels spill," and "waggons waver and crash and
kill" transmit with increasing momentum and deadly force
the tremor set in action by the catapult. The imagery of
the entire stanza is typical of the literary rather than
the folk ballad and particularly characteristic of Chester-
ton. In his reader he strikes a responsive chord; by vast,
unlooked-for comparisons and vivid word-pictures the imagi-
 nation is excited and strong emotion induced.

Generally Chesterton uses color words of glowing
intensity: "scarlet beards"; "purple moons"; "grey-green
eyes"; "sanguine sunset"; "gold and flaming glass"; "crim-
son seas"; "green wine"; "red hells and golden heavens."
Though like the old balladists he prefers vivid colors,
there are instances in which he paints with delicate artis-
try: "cup of chrysolite and pearls"; "coloured pavements
sink and fade in flowers"; "opal slime"; "pearled foam";
"silver dust." The most beautiful of his color-imagery is
found in passages of unusual charm discussed farther on in
this chapter.
Speaking of Chesterton's use of color words

Maurice Evans says:

The White Horse is full of sea greens, scarlet, sapphire, and golden hair very reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites. Grey, especially, is common, so common indeed as to be almost meaningless - "a great grey cave," "the grey morn of man's life," "grey carven men," "a tall grey horse" to mention only a few of its applications. 56.

There are, moreover, many concrete images which strike the reader forcibly because of their originality or their unexpected connotation. Some of these verbal pictures are: "infant hours"; "wizard lanes"; "cloven way"; "insect-laden skies"; "bitter blood"; "resurrected race"; "womanish hair"; "level and imperial eye"; "cobwebbed nail on high." Certain phrases ingeniously present sound imagery: "roaring stillness"; "panting peace"; "shrill seadowns"; "sang high and deathly"; "stillness of stiff grass"; "soundless as an arrow of snow"; "horses like horns of nightmare Neigh horribly and long."

It is apparent that Chesterton uses concrete words with power and originality. His pictures, strong in their elemental directness and vigor, reflect Alfred's England and his people. The power of his imagery is nowhere more brilliantly displayed than in the masterly strokes of his characterizations of Alfred's allies.

Eldred the Saxon, Mark the Roman, and Colan the Gael represent the three civilizations of Britain previous to the Danish invasions. Each exemplifies the contribution of his race to the aggregate which was then England. To portray these chieftains Chesterton uses bold imagery which stimulates emotion by its vivid, specific word and phrase, by personification, simile, and metaphor, often accentuated by hyperbole.

In his quest for troops to fight the Danes Alfred goes to Eldred. The great franklin is unwilling to sacrifice his already depleted retinue in further useless wars, yet he welcomes his king with whole-hearted hospitality. Eldred's lavish, easy-going disposition is apparent in his farm and home.

But Eldred's farm was fallen awry,
   Like an old cripple's bones,
And Eldred's tools were red with rust,
And on his well was a green crust,
   And purple thistles upward thrust,
   Between the kitchen stones.

But smoke of some good feasting
   Went upwards evermore
And Eldred's doors stood wide apart
For loitering foot or labouring cart,
   And Eldred's great and foolish heart
   Stood open like his door.57

"Like an old cripple's bones" aptly sums up the unwieldy estate of Eldred's "idle farm." The picture is

57. 23.
intensified by vivid color contrasts: "red with rust," "green crust," and "purple thistles." The old chieftain, indulging in ease and feasting, is readily imposed upon by all his friends.

And Eldred's great and foolish heart
Stood open like his door.

Eldred is aware of his hospitable, easy-going manner.

Before Ethandune he draws his own portrait.

But men and birds and beasts shall weep
At the burial of a fool. 58

In his delineation of the Saxon warrior, Chesterton indulges in hyperbole to the extent of being grotesque. In fact, he revels in exaggeration.

A mighty man was Eldred,
   A bulk for casks to fill,
His face a dreaming furnace,
   His body a walking hill. 59

And slowly

Arose the sea-land lord,
Like some vast beast for mystery,
He filled the room and porch and sky,
And from a cobwebbed nail on high
Unhooked his heavy sword. 60

Here in metaphor, strangely grotesque, Eldred's huge figure looms before the reader; "bulk for casks to fill,"

58. 95.
59. 24.
60. 26.
"a dreaming furnace," "a walking hill." Hyperbole accentuates the old chieftain's great size and surrounds him with a kind of awe.

Like some vast beast for mystery
He filled the room and porch and sky.

Farther on in the poem Chesterton again indulges in hyperbole concerning the Saxon.

His face like a sanguine sunset,
His shoulder a Wessex down.

Into his picture of the mighty Eldred Chesterton introduces unlooked for turns of thought which surprise by their unexpectedness, and yet more by the vital worth of the seemingly trivial things they connote.

But while he moved like a massacre
He murmured as in sleep,
And his words were all of low hedges
And little fields and sheep.

Even as he strode like a pestilence,
That strides from Rhine to Rome,
He thought how tall his beans might be
If ever he went home.

Spoke some stiff piece of childish prayer,
Dull as the distant chimes,
That thanked our God for good eating
And corn and quiet times --

Men fight to preserve their homes; "little fields and sheep," and "beans" and "corn" are fundamental to the lives of all peoples.

61. 110.

62. 111-12.
Chesterton's creation of the massive Eldred recalls Browning's grotesque outbursts. In "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" there are the characteristic exaggeration and the unlooked-for turn of thought.

Lo you, the wick in the socket!
Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there!
Down it dips, gone like a rocket.
What, you want, do you, to come unawares,
Sweeping the church up for first morning-prayers,
And find a poor devil has ended his cares
At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs?
Do I carry the moon in my pocket?63

When the magic spear of Elf the minstrel finally pierces the mighty Eldred, the Saxon's downfall is presented in a simile of violent power and movement.

Then fell, as falls a battle-tower,
On smashed and struggling spears,
Cast down from some unconquered town
That, rushing earthward, carries down
Loads of live men of all renown --
Archers and engineers.64

Mark, "the man from Italy," (28) represents Rome's contribution to British civilization. Though he "still made the Christian sign," (29) Mark seems to personify Rome's military discipline, her love for law and order, her hard-headedness, her martial and worldly prosperity, rather than the Faith which she had brought to Britain. Nowhere does Mark reveal his Christian heritage, though Colan of the Druids


64. 115.
pays tribute to Roman Christian civilization when he says,

Before the Roman lit the land,
When schools and monks were none.65

Quite the contrary, Rome with her military imperialism appears to be the idol enshrined in Mark's character.

In delineating Mark, Chesterton pointedly intensified his portrait by using specific rather than abstract words and phrases. Mark prided himself on his ancient lineage; Chesterton acknowledged the Italian's imperial ancestry.

And Mark had fought because all arms
Rang like the name of Rome.66

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

A bronzed man, with a bird's bright eye;
And a strong bird's beak and brow,
His skin was brown like buried gold,
And of certain of his sires was told
That they came in shining ship of old,
With Caesar in the prow.67

Mark's military genius is reflected even in his farm.

His fruit trees stood like soldiers
Drilled in a straight line.68

65. 97.
66. 133.
67. 29.
68. 29.
As the leader and his troops draw near the river hut, Chesterton thus crystallizes the Roman's disciplinary traits, "Marcus with all his slaves in arms." (78) Marcus rather than Mark, and slaves converted into soldiers -- these imply the chieftain's military acumen. His approach bristles with Rome's virile, determined aggressiveness.

The third great thunder on the wind,
The living walls that hedge mankind;
The walking walls of Rome.69

Though Mark's retinue was composed of slaves, so skillfully had he inoculated them with the virus of arms that

... Like one man in armour
Those hundreds trod the field.70

When Alfred informs Mark of Mary's commission, with the intuitive discernment and mental acuteness of his race the Roman is quick to sense the vastness and difficulty of the enterprise as well as the weakness of the King's forces. He tells Alfred bluntly that winning the crown means capturing London. Here Chesterton gives one of his delightful, surprising turns of thought. Mark has been evaluating the scope of the campaign, weighing the odds. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he reverts to matters practical and close at hand.

69. 80.
70. 81.
"I doubt if you shall take the crown
Till you have taken London town.
For me, I have the vines." 71

A man of few words, "wise with his tongue," (134) the Italian is not only niggardly in speech, but makes his every look and gesture serve to significant purpose. Alfred comes to enlist the support of "the southland man." (29) The encounter and Mark's interrogation, a silent one, are expressed succinctly:

And fronted with the Italian's eye,
Asking him of his whence and why,
King Alfred stood . . . 72

Appalled by the forbidding array of Guthrum's army, each Christian chieftain reacts true to his ancestral inheritance. Mark personifies Rome, its traditional impassivity to fear, its lordly, patriotic pride.

In the eyes Italian all things
But a black laughter died; 73

A proud man was the Roman,
His speech a single one, 74

Mark cares not where he may be buried

71. 32.
72. 30.
73. 93.
74. 98.
"For all the earth is Roman earth
And I shall die in Rome." 75

As in his presentation of Eldred the Saxon and
Colan the Celt, Chesterton reserves his best delineation
of the Roman Mark till his final appearance. The portrait
is a miniature, cameo-like in its clearness, etching, syn­
thesizing valor, imperial dominion, stoic heroism, in a
word -- Rome.

Then the great statue on the shield
Looked his last look around
With level and imperial eye;
And Mark, the man from Italy,
Fell in the sea of agony,
And died without a sound. 76

Colan of Caerleon, the leader of the Gaels, "a
race in ruin," (34) is

... come like a shadow,
From the shadow of Druid trees. 77

Colan reflects the spirit of an ancient people, Christian,
yet tainted with the superstitions of its pagan ancestry.
Many of the figures of speech by which Chesterton depicts
Colan and his people are drawn from nature, and aptly so,
for these men lived close to earth. The poet's concrete
words reflect the decay which has overtaken the race. With

75. 99.
76. 122.
77. 34.
enigma, which so frequently renders the Irish incomprehensible to the stoic mind, Chesterton surrounds Colan and his warrior band.

The weird, impoverished condition of the Gaels reveals itself as they gather at Alfred's mustering place, "the hut by Egbert's Stone." (39)

The dim clan of the Gael
Came like a bad king's burial-end,
With dismal robes that drop and rend
And demon pipes that wail --

In long, outlandish garments,
Torn, though of antique worth,
With Druid beards and Druid spears,
As a resurrected race appears
Out of an elder earth.78

For Colan was hung with raiment
Tattered like autumn leaves,
And his men were all as thin as saints,
And all as poor as thieves.79

Practically every line quoted above contains words and phrases specifically connative of the utter destitution of Colan and his army. "Dim clan," "dismal robes," "outlandish garments," "Druid beards and Druid spears," "resurrected race," and "elder earth" are concrete pictures of the ruin that has impoverished these "Grey carven men" (80) whom Alfred, as they gathered around him at dusk, thought to have been "Hewn in an age of stone." (80) "Tattered

78. 79.

79. 102.
like autumn leaves" is a particularly appropriate compar-
ison for the garments of these dwellers of cave and forest,
and peculiarly fitting for warriors from the Isle of Saints
is it that they should be "as thin as saints."

Concrete words expressing the ancient regal lin-
eage of the people and their present engulfing ruin are
evident in Chesterton's description of the Gael's country.
Forcefully they reveal utter devastation.

For the man dwelt in a lost land
Of boulders and broken men

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Where Usk, with mighty murmurings,
Past Caerleon of the fallen kings,
Goes out to ghostly seas.80

Colan, a Christian, clings to the traditions and
superstitions of his pagan ancestors. Chesterton conveys
this to the reader not by abstractions, but by specific
incidents drawn from the Christianity and paganism blended
in Colan.

He made the sign of the Cross of God,
He knew the Roman prayer,
But he had unreason in his heart
Because of the gods that were.81

True to the Druid in him, the old warrior imagines that
even in death he will hear the trees talk.

80. 33-34.

81. 36.
"Yet I could lie and listen
With a cross upon my clay,
And hear unhurt for ever
What the trees of Britain say."

Especially convincing is Chesterton's revelation of the Gaelic traits in Colan's character. "Moody and madly gay," (134) he possessed the typically Irish gift of laughter and tears.

And he was gay when he held the sword,  
Sad when he held the harp.

For the great Gaels of Ireland  
Are the men that God made mad,  
For all their wars are merry,  
And all their songs are sad.

However, the poet employs his happiest figures in the following description of the wild chieftain.

And all were moved a little,  
But Colan stood apart,  
Having first pity, and after  
Hearing, like rat in rafter  
That little worm of laughter  
That eats the Irish heart.

Here simile and metaphor delight not only by their appropriateness, but also by their naïve quaintness.

In final reference to Colan, Chesterton sets to weird music the Gael's last appearance. The "dregs" (151) of his army, bearing aloft the body of their dead lord,
rally for the last charge.

And a strange music went with him,
Loud and yet strangely far;
The wild pipes of the western land,
Too keen for the ear to understand,
Sang high and deathly on each hand
When the dead man went to war. 85

In the ballad are lines over whose poetic beauty
the reader is enticed to linger. To read them is to be
convinced that "Poetry is the thing which we immediately
recognize as poetry."

And grey cattle and silver lowed
Against the unlifted morn, 87
And when white dawn crawled through the wood,
Like cold foam of a flood, 88
Grey twilight and a yellow star,
Hung over thorn and hill; 89
With velvet finger, velvet foot,
The fierce soft mosses then
Crept on the large white commonweal 90

Had not the imperative need of combating neopaganism
forced Chesterton to fight with the pen, what might not
the poet within him have achieved?

__________________________
85. 193-4.
86. Louis Untermeyer and Carter Davidson, editors,  
87. 79.
88. 92.
89. 137.
90. 191.
One concludes, therefore, that Chesterton's strikingly effective imagery combines the manner of the folk and of the literary ballad. Direct, homely, elemental, it recreates the primitive atmosphere of Alfred's day. Because *The Ballad of the White Horse* is a song of victory -- the paean of Christianity's triumph over paganism -- on the whole its imagery is massive, bold. Huge figures, grotesque often, drive home the truth with martial thrust.

In its use of abundant simile and metaphor Chesterton's ballad resembles the literary type; in the hyperbole which it employs to portray the Saxon Eldred, the grotesque predominates. Carried beyond himself in his zeal for the Christian cause Chesterton at times revels in extravaganza. Yet he has so infected his reader with his buoyant zest that the occasional incongruity of the figurative language does not annoy.

From nature — wild either because of the ruin ensuing from pagan inroads or because of its virginal character — Chesterton draws his sound and color effects. His words glow with vibrant life, expressive of the intensity of the poet's fiery ardor. In fact the color words of the ballad call to mind Chesterton's other stirring poem of similar theme, "Lepanto."
The image is power. With Chesterton it is no mere ornament, enriching beauty. Imbued with the poet's jubilant Christianity the imagery recaptures, despite its figurative phrases, the pristine virility of the ancient tales. The ballad's subjectivity strengthens rather than vitiates its pungent, primitive flavor.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted a study of The Ballad of the White Horse as an excellent modern imitation of the old folk ballad whose primitive spirit Chesterton recaptures through his exultant Christianity. It has endeavored to show that the transcendence of The Ballad of the White Horse over most ballad poetry lies in the sublimity of its theme.

Chapter One, considering the narrative of Chesterton's poem against its historical and legendary background, discovers it to be typical of ballad poetry. It relates a series of episodes in the struggle of Alfred the Great against the Danish invaders of the ninth century. The scene of the conflict is the Vale of the White Horse in the Berkshires. True to the dicta of the folk ballad the tale is the story of a great leader, the idol of the English people.

Without explanation Chesterton takes the White Horse as a symbol of the British commonweal and expects the reader to accept it as such. Childlike in his credulity he tells of Alfred's vision and of his espousal of the Christian cause, a cause without hope. Each event in the campaign moves rapidly. The chieftains on both
sides are men of deeds, not words. For the pagans, life is black and bleak; Christian and pagan alike are men of violent passions; both accept death unwincingly.

Thus, in its choice of the exploits of the great ones of earth as its story, and in the swift narration of their deeds in bold, terse phrase provocative of powerful emotion, The Ballad of the White Horse is seen to emulate the original ballads.

Consideration of Chapter Two discloses that the metrical form of The Ballad of the White Horse is characteristic of the old ballads. Chesterton adopts the four-line stanza as the basic pattern of his poem, but deviates from it freely according as the sweep of his narrative or the force of his emotion carries him over into a five, six, seven, or even an eight-line stanza. On occasion he introduces an anapest or a trochee into the iambic meter to convey specific effects of his narrative. The poem, on the whole, swings to the simple, singing rhythm of the folk song.

Originally ballads were sung or read aloud. Chapter two exemplifies how by skillful tone coloring, secured through alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, the poet brings to his ballad desired harmonious or discordant sound effects. He employs repetition as the "re-
turn" rather than as the refrain. In the above-mentioned ways Chesterton reproduces the metrical form and musical tone of the early ballads.

From the observation made in Chapter Three, it is apparent that in its style The Ballad of the White Horse combines the manner of the old and the literary ballads. Simplicity and directness characterize the popular ballad; Chesterton's imagery and diction possess power and originality. Strong Saxon words, quaint phrases, and realistic images of virile might bear along the burden of his canticle. Chesterton is more profuse and hyperbolic than were the early ballad singers. Some readers consider this a defect; others regard it as the mere exuberance of the poet's joy over the Christian victory. The subjectivity of the poem does not destroy its ballad quality, but renders its appeal the more effective.

The narrative, metrical form, and style of The Ballad of the White Horse are found to be typical of the folk ballad. Its subjectivity alone differentiates it from the older type. Yet this very subjectivity does not destroy its ballad quality. On the contrary, Chesterton's exultant joy in the Christian cause resounds through his poem, gathering up in its ever-increasing momentum the minor ballad tones and blending all into a glorious
symphony of victory. It is the sublimity of its theme, the triumph of Christianity over paganism, which recaptures the primitive spirit of the old ballad and gives to The Ballad of the White Horse its transcendence over most ballad poetry.
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