Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908

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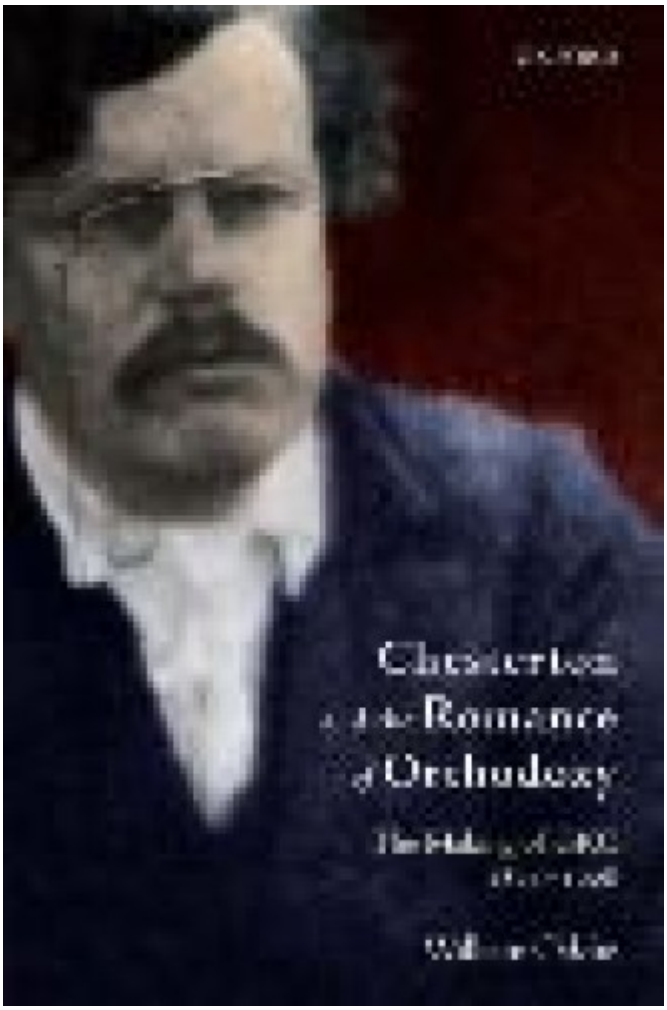

Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908

William Oddie

Oxford University Press

G. K. Chesterton is often regarded as a staunch and unwavering apologist for Christianity, a culture-warrior of the right, a rollicking jester who trounced his opponents with incisive paradoxes and witty self-mockery. There is partial truth in this reading, but it is more valid for the older and somewhat repetitive Chester ton than for the younger and far more original writer. William Oddie's fine account of Chesterton's early intellectual formation—as he moved from a life-shaking skepticism to a convinced and self-critical faith—is a helpful corrective to the notion that, like a latter-day Athena, GKC sprang from the godhead as a full-blown *defensor fidei*.

As the editor of London's *Catholic Herald* and a convert from Anglicanism, Oddie offers no triumphalist reading of Chesterton. He demonstrates, for example, that the mature Chesterton's richly Christian and analogical mind was formed in the secular and rather bohemian atmosphere of his childhood. Though Chesterton's parents were officially Anglican, functionally they were Uni tarians. Their late Victorian household gave young Chesterton what conventional religion would not: it was animated by art and ideas, by books and discussion, and above all by a creativity that provided free play for the imagination. His father strung fairy lanterns in the garden, worked in stained glass and watercolors, modeled clay and made photographs. Best of all, he set up a huge toy theater, where dragons were slain by knights and where conspiracies were plotted and averted.

The remarkable result is that the young Chesterton emerged not with a head full of dreamy magic but with a vision focused on the clarity and solidity of things. This "purified and primitive" seeing, as he later called it, would remain his lifelong gift. Reality is "too clear for most of us to comprehend," he wrote in 1901, "and too obvious for most of us to see." Our finite and fallen imaginations refuse to behold the surplus of light that pervades the entirety of created being.

Oddie provides an excellent account of the making of Chesterton's mind by tracing the path that led through his youth at St. Paul's School, then his crucial years at the Slade School of Art in the University of London, until his crucial breakthrough in the early years of the 20th century. Out of virtual anonymity Chesterton burst onto the London scene as a major controversialist, publishing in the span of six years (1903-1909) seven outstanding books: his critical studies of Browning and Dickens, his novels *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Ball and the Cross*, his collection of

essays titled *Heretics*, and his two most remarkable works, *Orthodoxy* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*.

Oddie tunneled deep into the Chesterton archives at the British Library to give us fresh access, via unpublished notebooks and uncollected journal articles, to the making of the great man's mind. In so doing, has made crucial corrections and modifications to prior interpretations of Chesterton. We have known, for example, that Ches terton's almost suicidal crisis in the mid-1890s was prompted by his encounter with the Impressionists, especially Whistler. They made him fear that life is nothing other or more than our momentary perceptions—indeed, that nothing is real except as we think it so, that everything is an illusion, that the universe has no final floor. Oddie alters this standard reading by showing that Chesterton's real concern was not epistemological so much as ethical and artistic.

Chesterton was appalled by the amoral aestheticism of Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and the other Decadents. It was not chiefly their homoeroticism that troubled him. He was much more vexed by their notion that art has no moral purpose, just as they believed that life itself has none, and that we are thus meant to live only for the passions of the moment. "Self-denial," Wilde had written, "is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice [is] a survival . . . of that old worship of pain . . . which even now . . . has its altars in the land." "Purity and simplicity," Chesterton replied to such preening self-indulgence, "are essential to passions—even to vile passions. Even vice demands virgins."

Oddie reminds us that Chesterton never ceased being haunted by the incubus of pessimism. The fear that evil will finally triumph over good is a dread that is endemic to human existence, Chesterton believed. *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the fictional version of Chesterton's recovery from this spiritual crisis, is rightly subtitled *A Nightmare*. There he demonstrates that the universe often seems maddeningly double-sided. The God who is present is also the God who is absent. Chesterton claims that in Gethsemane, Christ himself experienced "the human horror of pessimism." Even the Good News is that God suspends the whole cosmos by a gossamer thread. We are like flies on the ceiling, Chesterton liked to say, and it's a miracle that we don't drop off.

Chesterton's Christian conversion did not make him a reactionary; it made him an old-fashioned liberal instead. He opposed the Boer War, he vindicated the French Revolution, and he never relinquished his concern for the poor. Chesterton became a

Christian from the socialist left, not from the capitalist right. He won his way toward convinced belief through a clutch of writers not likely to be found in a roll call of the orthodox: Robert Louis Stevenson, Walt Whitman and William Blake. They taught him that the universe is not an inert realm awaiting human mastery and control, whether by science or art, but that the cosmos is brimming with a vitality that is meant to prompt our gratitude and embrace. The world contains “a submerged sunrise of wonder,” Chesterton came to see, and it should inspire us to celebrate but not to worship its delights.

Yet Chesterton went far beyond an exuberant vitalism that would make God wholly immanent. His great discovery—later to be confirmed by his study of Thomas Aquinas, and long before he became a Catholic in 1922—was that God’s transcendence enables God’s real activity. It is not that God is so abstract and far removed as to be truant or nonexistent; rather, God is so near and actual that he cannot be defined. God is always bearing down on or pushing up through the world, finally and definitively in Christ and his church. The result is that every created thing—from toadstools and lampposts to political revolutions—offer occasions for sacramental discernment, as the incarnation becomes the lens for detecting what is evil and what is good, what reflects the glory of God and what obscures it.

For Chesterton, this is the tremendous meaning of the Sabbath. God rests and rejoices not to affirm that his universe is perfect, but to declare that it is good. The staggering surprise is that the world is a risk-laden mystery rather than an immaculate machine. It seems inconceivable that God did not create a perfectly flawless universe, but he created something strangely better instead: a cosmos that he superintends through the contingencies of natural causation and human willing. Like Martin Luther staring wonder-struck at a single kernel of grain, or Julian of Norwich beholding “all that is made” in a lone hazelnut, Chesterton is astonished at the sheer gratuity of everything, from trees to babies. Since paradox is truth standing on its head and waving its legs to get our attention, then Leibniz should also be turned upside down: it is just the queer, incredible look of the world that should make us feel that we are in a fairy tale. It is the best of all impossible worlds.