THE GENIUS OF CHESTERTON

HOWEVER we define genius, power and originality are inseparable from it. A genius often has more faults than the merely talented or competent. But power of thought and expression, and originality (not to be confused with novelty which can be manufactured) are always there. Now in Shaw's words 'Chesterton was a man of colossal genius'. Though he had many faults, in power and originality few writers have surpassed him. In some cases genius grows slowly: in others it develops suddenly late in life: in a few cases, such as Mozart, Keats, and Dickens, it emerges at once. Chesterton's genius, his thought and style, was born complete in his earliest work. It matured; but there was no great increase of power, and the originality of style was there from the start. Perhaps the upheaval that took place in late adolescence, when he entered a period of doubt and depression and emerged triumphant, was the flame that fired the train of his genius; for his work was intimately bound up with his character—unlike so many men of genius whose characters are in pitiable contrast to their work, Chesterton's mind and work were all of a piece.

The humility and charity and love of life that distinguished him, and impressed all who met him, were integrally one with his work. His humility, his sense of thankfulness for all creation, gave him a clarity of vision that can exist only when the ego is reduced to the fine point needed for sharp focus. The enlarged ego blurs the whole of reality. Chesterton's humility was revealed in a graciousness and humour all his own. There was courtesy in his big lumbering figure; there was humour in the eye that saw the kink in things—the slight deviation from the norm that is less than virtue but not yet evil. His humility sharpened the insight that distinguished his work: his charity overflowed from a good will towards men and an equally good will towards ideas and things. Charity, though seen as necessary in human relationships, is usually disregarded in ideas. But there is an intellectual charity which seeks for harmony in the world of ideas as in the world of men. Chesterton condemned: he sundered ideas as with a sword; but he did so with a more keen and sensitive appreciation of his opponent's personality and thought than perhaps any other controversialist of his age. Charity and good will prevented his frequent and very effective irony from becoming malicious. He was rarely personal, and could attack without bitterness and with complete good humour. He was admired and loved by men who disagreed with everything he stood for: who disliked his religion and despised his politics—men such as Wells, who spoke

for the majority of his literary colleagues when he said: 'I *loved* Chesterton'.

We cannot separate Chesterton's unique genius from his unique character. He was, in the truest and best sense, a great 'character'—that is, one possessed of the normal traditions and feelings of mankind plus originality and distinction. A character differs in this from an oddity who is distinguished from his fellow men by a certain inhumanity: for example, Shaw, who, with all his genius and fundamental sanity, is odd in his clothes, tastes in food and drink, and general behaviour. Chesterton was a man of universal humanity. In his range of emotion and tastes he stood for all that the ordinary man stands for. He defended the eternal things of mankind against transcendentalism and materialism. The most remarkable thing about him was his ordinariness and rich humanity allied to a unique personality; and the keynote of his message was the apotheosis of ordinary universal things.

What was the content of Chesterton's genius, apart from its manifestation as power and originality? Among his greatest qualities were insight (a better word than intuition, which is clouded with irrational connotations) and association of ideas. His insight was remarkable in every sphere, but was chiefly psychological. Now insight and association of ideas are exercised primarily through the imaginative reason. We may conveniently regard reason as operating in four forms: absolute reason, which gives the first principles from which all knowledge proceeds; imperative reason, which gives the moral commands; abstract reason, which arrives at knowledge through abstraction from the raw material of experience; and imaginative reason, which combines ideas in such a way as to arrive at new truths. Imaginative reason is the driving force of most of the greatest creative minds, those who have carried philosophy (whether in its technical or literary forms) forward. Imaginative reason, with its keen insight, associates ideas by seeing the hidden likenesses in things apparently unlike, and thus draws out the new that is implicit in the old: i.e., from the thought of being, and of its apparent opposite, nothing, Hegel leaps to the thought of becoming. Chesterton was not so much concerned to discover metaphysical truths of this kind as to reveal concrete universal truths in a new light. To paraphrase his own style, the new truth that he revealed was the old.

Chesterton was able to make his revelation with greater force because, besides possessing the great gift of imaginative reason, he also had the gift of imaginative sensibility. Imaginative sensibility is imaginative reason applied to sense data—as when we combine and arrange sounds in music, masses and shapes in sculpture, or

colours and forms in painting. In literature, above all in poetry where words are arranged and combined ideologically and sensuously, the two forms of imaginative reason and sensibility are intimately fused. In Chesterton's prose they are fused in a wonderful unity.

To this intimate unity of imaginative reason and sensibility Chesterton added great emotional power. Emotion is the concrete unity of idea and sensation. When an idea is so strongly present that it gives rise to a physical sensation—laughter, tears, increased pulse, irregular breathing—we have emotion. Emotion is not, as commonly supposed, a vague indefinable 'something' contrary to reason; it is the ingression of an idea into feeling, and is dangerous only because the feeling may come to be valued for its own sake, so distorting the idea behind it. We are moved emotionally by Chesterton just because he could cast the most subtle and profound idea in a phrase of intense literary sensibility. In this emotional power he was far above most contemporary literary prophets such as Galsworthy, Shaw, Aldous Huxley. As a thinker he was equal to the cleverest of thinkers: as a man of letters he could stand with the most artistic men of letters. To sum up: the content of Chesterton's genius was insight (mainly psychological) and association of ideas, operating through imaginative reason and sensibility with deep emotional power, expressed in paradox.

Paradox may be defined as the provocative statement of an apparently self-contradictory proposition which nevertheless contains a hidden or disguised truth. Now paradox is closely related to the imaginative reason. Hegel's conclusions were not cast in the literary form of paradox, but were dialectic; and in many cases they were reached by slow and laborious methods. Nevertheless they *are* paradoxes. 'Being is nothing' is at first sight a violent contradiction. But if pure being empty of all attributes is *no thing*, it is, in fact, nothing, and the idea that emerges from being-nothing is becoming. (We need not necessarily subscribe to the truth of the Hegelian paradox to see the force of it.) Chesterton's paradoxes were not metaphysical; he was a psycho-empirical thinker, and his paradoxes were direct and concrete. He wrote that 'the use of paradox is to awaken the mind'.

> Take a good paradox, like that of Oliver Wendell Holmes: 'Give us the luxuries of life and we will dispense with the necessities'. It is amusing and therefore arresting; it has a fine air of defiance; it contains a real if romantic truth. It is all part of the fun that it is stated almost in the form of a contradiction in terms.

Most of Chesterton's own paradoxes are on a far higher level than

this. He was too serious a thinker ever to use paradox idly for its own sake, and those who dismiss him as a mere paradox-monger reveal nothing but their own superficiality. He writes casually in the middle of an essay that in many things the modern world 'is wrong even when it is right', and explains this later by saying that when the moderns are right they are very often right by prejudice.

Chesterton's paradoxical expression of his thoughts proceeded from his insight into the paradoxes of reality, above all of Christianity. Writing of the birth of Christ he says that 'it is the paradox of that group in the cave, that while our emotions about it are of childish simplicity, our thoughts about it can branch with a never-ending complexity. And we can never reach the end even of our own ideas about the child who was a father and the mother who was a child'. That is brilliant; and sublime. It is both rational and rhetorical—and completely original in expression. No other writer has ever thought or written in paradox to the extent of Chesterton. Many have introduced paradoxes liberally into their work, and made the characters in plays speak them frequently; but none have written *in* paradox, or produced paradoxes of such conviction and truth. At times he was over-lavish in his use of it, mostly in his earlier works. If the use of paradox is, as he said, to awaken the mind, too many paradoxes, especially if they are almost continually brilliant and profound, fail in their effect. The mind is certainly awakened, but soon becomes irritated and exhausted, with the result that the reader is apt angrily to dismiss the work as mere intellectual jugglery. Yet no matter how extravagant in paradox, Chesterton's reasoning is always informed by a fundamental common sense grounded in experience.

Successful paradox demands great power in the choice and use of words. Chesterton's use of words was original, incisive, exact, imaginative, and associative in the highest degree. Two examples come to mind out of thousands—his comment on the days when the 'business man was still permitted to mind his own business', and his remark that snobs 'are those who want to get into Society' while prigs are 'those who want to get out of Society and into Societies'. This is not mere 'cleverness': the ironical play on the words 'business' and 'society' brings out incisive truths.

But these are only light examples chosen at random. Chesterton made his effect in a verbal field of immense variety and extraordinary precision. The importance of words has been stressed in modern times by logical analysis. Many of the implications of this school are extremely myopic, as that metaphysics are meaningless, and derive from ill-stated propositions—indeed there is a certain smug-

ness about the whole movement, with its dismissal of God and ultimate reality; it encloses man in a kind of mental suburbia. But, like most forms of extremism, the movement has drawn attention to a neglected field, and has done much of value to clear up the mess left by 'romantic' philosophy. Its main contention, that the meaning of a proposition is bound up with the syntactical form in which it is cast, is illuminating, and has thrown light on many old problems. Chesterton's imaginative genius was far removed from the excessive abstraction and analysis of Logical Positivism: at the same time he had this in common with it, that he could illumine old problems and truths by re-stating them in a different and entirely original syntactical form.

Chesterton's thought and style are highly concentrated; there is no padding. He never wrote long books. But this intense concentration, like his frequent use of paradox, easily leads to exhaustion. He is not a writer who can be read for any great length of time. At its best, his style is benevolent, reasonable, persuasive, cool, self-possessed, masculine and musical, rising at times to great emotional heights. His style was one of the most personal in the history of literature: it can be instantly recognised in a couple of sentences; and like all individual style it is, in essence, indefinable. His weaknesses were the repetition of verbal clichés (his own), alliteration and the double adjective, and the use of overcharged words such as 'awful' and 'tremendous'. Certain passages in Chesterton might be more effective if written in a more impersonal style. But on the whole his syntax was varied and balanced, and his diction simple. He said that Shaw had 'slain the polysyllable', and certainly he himself had been in at the death. Shaw's fine style is often spoiled by verbosity and over-long and involved diction, whereas Chesterton is never verbose. He has the power of stating a great idea in a great phrase with remarkable economy.

> There are people who say they wish Christianity to remain as a spirit. They mean, very literally, that they wish it to remain as a ghost. What follows this process of apparent death is not the lingering of the shade; it is the resurrection of the body. These people are quite prepared to shed pious and reverential tears over the Sepulchre of the Son of Man; what they are not prepared for is the Son of God walking once more upon the hills of morning.

Much of the sublimity of this (and similar passages) comes from the way in which it is built up. Both ideologically and rhythmically it moves expectantly towards the last sentence, which contains the essential idea clinched in a magnificent phrase. This architectural building up is very characteristic of Chesterton's style, and is particularly evident in the structure of his chapters, which usually

gather momentum towards the end, bringing all the threads of the argument together, and concluding in a climax of great power and beauty—as in the closing of the second chapter of *St Francis of Assisi*:

> For water itself has been washed. Fire itself has been purified as by fire. Water is no longer that water into which slaves were flung to feed the fishes. Fire is no longer that fire through which children were passed to Moloch. Flowers smell no more of the forgotten garlands gathered in the garden of Priapus; stars stand no more as signs of the far frigidity of gods as cold as those cold fires. They are all like things newly made and awaiting new names, from one who shall come to name them. Neither the universe nor the earth has now any longer the old sinister significance of the world. They await a new reconciliation with man, but they are already capable of being reconciled. Man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature-worship, and can return to nature.
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> While it was yet twilight a figure appeared silently and suddenly on a little hill above the city, dark against the fading darkness. For it was the end of a long and stern night, a night of vigil, not unvisited by stars. He stood with his hands uplifted, as in so many statues and pictures, and about him was a burst of birds singing; and behind him was the break of day.

St Francis is one of Chesterton's greatest books, terse, concentrated, compact but on a broad scale, exactly the right length for its particular aim. These qualities are found in all his books to some extent; but chiefly here.

All Chesterton's writings, even the most deeply religious and profound, are lightened with humour and fantasy. His humour is never boisterous. He rarely indulges in horseplay, but has a fine English flair for nonsense, and a genuine though rather punning wit. His fantasy is mainly found in the novels, where it is sometimes rather too exuberant. But in the essays and more philosophical works he introduces fantasy sparingly and at the right moment to underline the significance of an idea.

Although Chesterton had an immense range of interest, wide knowledge, and a remarkable memory, he was not a detailed thinker, and was inclined to ignore the humdrum data of facts. This is often a fault of the imaginative thinker: the imaginative reason requires continual checking in the cold light of abstract reason and fact. It is, however, surprising how relatively little inaccuracy there is in Chesterton's numerous writings, so many of which were written at pressure as part of the business of earning a living. Journalism influenced him indirectly both for good and ill; for good in keeping his imagination within bounds, for ill in making, at times, for hurried and insufficiently thought-out work. Journalism had no direct in-

fluence—indeed he violated most of its canons, and was accepted simply because he was completely original and intensely readable. 'On the whole', he wrote, 'I think I owe my success (as the millionaires say) to having listened respectfully and rather bashfully to the very best advice, given by all the best journalists who had achieved the best sort of success in journalism; and then going away and doing the exact opposite'. Journalism imparted to many of his works an ephemeral and surface quality. He was also, partly by reason of his trade, too eclectic, and would have got his message over more effectively had he specialised in one kind of book—say critical biography, in which he excelled.

But none of this detracts from his essential genius. Whatever the defects of his thought and style, however eclectic in form his work may have been, it embodies a great vision: of religion and values, of the fundamental goodness of life; the power of reason; the ideal of democracy. The things he attacked were the enemies of man—pessimism, scepticism, totalitarianism; and, as we now see, because they were the enemies of the human spirit they must become ultimately the enemies of the Holy Spirit. His philosophy, implicit from the first, took root in the orthodox Christianity of the Apostles Creed, and finally flowered in the Catholic Church. In *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* he summed up his whole position as a Christian; in *The Outline of Sanity* he summed up the democratic-distributist position that partly followed from his religion, and partly confirmed it. In these three books (the first two undoubted masterpieces) is the whole of Chesterton's philosophy. They might well be bound in one volume. Neither *Orthodoxy* nor *The Everlasting Man* argues the case for Christianity on direct evidence. The Chestertonian case rests upon insight, primarily psychological, into certain general aspects of Christianity in relation to life and human nature which, taken with the more solid evidence that already exists, presents a most powerful case. Nobody ever defended Christianity in quite this way, or with such power and originality. Similarly, though with less brilliance, *The Outline of Sanity* makes out a most impressive case for a politics that grows out of, and ministers to, human needs, rather than one planned abstractly and mechanically imposed upon mankind. In each case, in religion and politics, Chesterton's imaginative reason grasps ancient and obvious truths, and seeing hidden likenesses, unites them, leaping forward to a brilliant conclusion that fits the whole argument. These three works, and the critical biographies, *Dickens*, *Chaucer*, *St Francis*, and the rest (and his own fine *Autobiography*) are Chesterton's best, most inspired, most consistently and carefully planned work, and his greatest achievement.

The rest of the work, essays, fiction, the two plays, verse and miscellanea, though containing some wonderful things, is very unequal in quality. The best essays, such as *Tremendous Trifles*, are, in the finest sense, tremendous trifles, terse, lively, each containing an original and often explosive idea, brilliantly expressed. The fiction is perhaps his least distinguished work, though *Manalive* is very impressive (the title tells us the chief thing about its author), and the *Father Brown Stories*, in which Chesterton acts as a sort of metaphysical sleuth, are perfect in their way. In spite of his dramatic qualities, Chesterton was not a successful playwright. Whether he was an altogether successful poet is another matter. His *Collected Poems* contain some magnificent lines, simple, moving, powerful—

> Of great limbs gone to chaos,
> A great face turned to night—
> Why bend above a shapeless shroud
> Seeking in such archaic cloud
> Sight of strong lords and light?

Nevertheless there is a surface quality about many of his poems.

Chesterton dealt with permanent and universal themes. But he was very English. His Catholicism, like that of other great Englishmen such as St Thomas More, Newman, Elgar, was bound up with his Englishness. It was the universal background to an almost provincial feeling. In all his works he is for ever arguing the need for twin loyalties to the Absolute and the intimate: to the Faith and to the home. Only in the light of the first can the second be preserved. For Chesterton the Faith made England, and only the Faith will preserve the home against impersonal totalitarianism.

In all he wrote Chesterton was supremely alive. One may be irritated with him, exhausted by him; but never bored. His vivid imagination was poured out in a torrent of reasoning and sensibility, argument, illustration, evocation, provocation; never complacent, always kindly, always human. Today he is one of the most frequently quoted authors, and has become something of a classic. Those who still dismiss him as superficial do so on superficial grounds. It is only when we re-read him slowly, with care and sympathy, that the greatness of the man emerges. At least that is the experience of one critic.

ROBERT HAMILTON.