

Chesterton's Real Opinion of 'The Man Who Was Thursday'

G. K. Chesterton had a low opinion of his own abilities as a novelist. "[M]y real judgment of my own work," he confessed, "is that I have spoilt a number of jolly good ideas in my time."

"I think "The Napoleon of Notting Hill" was a book very well worth writing; but I am not sure that it was ever written. I think that a harlequinade like "The Flying Inn" was an extremely promising subject, but I very strongly doubt whether I kept the promise. I am almost tempted to say that it is still a very promising subject—for somebody else.

He thought *The Ball and the Cross* had "quite a good plot," based on "a social suggestion that really has a great deal in it; but I am much more doubtful about whether I got a great deal out of it." Although as stories or "anecdotes," his fictional works were "fresh and personal," "considered as novels, they were not only not as good as a real novelist would have made them, but they were not as good as I might have made them myself, if I had really even been trying to be a real novelist." [1]

Considering that Chesterton prefaced this confession of failure with an explicit denial that he was indulging in "mock modesty," we have little option but to believe that this was indeed his "real judgment" on his own fictional work. This places the admirer of Chesterton's novels in an awkward position. Do we question Chesterton's judgment or, eating humble pie, do we question our own?

Although eating humble pie is good for us, providing healthy spiritual nourishment, we are nonetheless at liberty to seek further clarification of the reasons for Chesterton's self-

deprecatory judgment. Such is provided in his conclusion that he was not able to be a novelist because he had always been a journalist. The fact is that Chesterton wrote everything in haste, as a spontaneous outpouring of his genial and ingenious muse. He wrote his novels in the same manner in which he wrote his essays, at breathtaking speed on the wings of wit and wisdom. One suspects that he seldom stopped to catch his breath, or to check his facts, as the flow of words poured forth from his pen. This makes for exhilarating and oft-times exhausting reading but it also leads, especially in his longer works of fiction, to a degree of negligence with regard to formal considerations of plot consistency and character development. It is for this reason that reading one of Chesterton's novels is like riding a ramshackle rollercoaster, so loosely constructed that it seems to teeter on the brink of collapse! And yet we ride the rollercoaster, in spite of our more pedantic prejudices, because we are doing so in the presence of an indefatigably rambunctious genius. Only a fool would not want to ride such a rollercoaster!

Having agreed with Chesterton's negative judgment of his own novels (without eating humble pie!), it is nonetheless intriguing that *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which is probably the best of his novels and certainly the best known, is omitted from the novels that he dismisses. What, one wonders, is the reason for this? Is it a mere oversight or is it perhaps a conscious omission? Either way, it seems a little odd that Chesterton should forget or omit to mention his best known and most celebrated novel in his self-effacing and self-deprecating dismissal of his oeuvre. Dare we believe that the best of his novels was omitted because Chesterton, believing it to be his best, did not feel that it warranted the same dismissive treatment as the others? Might we believe that it was not a sin of omission but a virtuous omission, much as T.S. Eliot significantly omits Rome from the list of "unreal cities" in *The Waste Land*:

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal

Eliot's omission of the Eternal City from the list of "falling towers" screams in the vacuum created by its absence, drawing attention to the fact that, unlike these other edifices of civilization, Rome is real and not destined to fall. Does Chesterton's omission of *Thursday* scream at us in the same way? Does he wish us to take it seriously as a work of literary art? My guess is that he does and I believe that we should.

Although *Thursday* suffers from the same formal negligence that afflicts Chesterton's other novels, a fact that the author admits in his description of it as a "formless form of a piece of fiction," it grapples so grippingly with the philosophical follies of the zeitgeist, and with such brio and brilliance, that it demands a place in the canon of great works.

As we begin to delve deeper into this darkest and yet lightest of novels, we should begin with the voice of authority, which is to say with the voice of the author. In his autobiography, written at the end of his life and therefore serving as his final judgment, Chesterton discussed the novel's title and, most significantly, its subtitle:

"The title attracted some attention at the time; and there were many journalistic jokes about it. Some, referring to my supposed festive views, affected to mistake it for "The Man Who Was Thirsty". Others naturally supposed that Man Thursday was the black brother of Man Friday. Others again, with more penetration, treated it as a mere title out of topsyturvydom; as if it had been "The Woman Who Was Half-past

Eight”, or “The Cow Who Was Tomorrow Evening”. But what interests me about it was this; that hardly anybody who looked at the title ever seems to have looked at the subtitle: which was “A Nightmare,” and the answer to a good many critical questions.”[2]

If, therefore, the critic would like to have his questions answered about this most beguiling and confusing of novels he needs to see it as a dark and dismal dreamscape, predating and perhaps prophesying the rise of surrealism, though very different from surrealism in its inspirational source and in its solution to the problems posed by the psychological subjectivism that it confronts.

The novel’s inspirational source was Chesterton’s own experience of the Decadence of the 1890s and his recoiling in horror from the radical pessimism of fashionable philosophers, such as Schopenhauer. Speaking in old age of his experience of such subjectivism as an impressionable young man, he wrote that “my eyes were turned inwards rather than outwards; giving my moral personality, I should imagine, a very unattractive squint”:

“I was still oppressed with the metaphysical nightmare of negations about mind and matter, with the morbid imagery of evil, with the burden of my own mysterious brain and body; but by this time I was in revolt against them; and trying to construct a healthier conception of cosmic life, even if it were one that should err on the side of health. I even called myself an optimist, because I was so horribly near to being a pessimist. It is the only excuse I can offer.”[3]

These lines from his autobiography immediately precede Chesterton’s discussion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, indicating that the novel grew from the murkiness and mawkishness of the author’s doubt-filled adolescence:

"[T]he whole story is a nightmare of things, not as they are, but as they seemed to the young half-pessimist of the '90s; and the ogre who appears brutal but is also cryptically benevolent is not so much God, in the sense of religion or irreligion, but rather Nature as it appears to the pantheist, whose pantheism is struggling out of pessimism. So far as the story had any sense in it, it was meant to begin with the picture of the world at its worst and to work towards the suggestion that the picture was not so black as it was already painted." [4]

Having paid due deference to the authorial voice and its inherent authority, we can now dare to question its veracity. Chesterton was writing this explication of his novel in the mid-1930s, shortly before his death, and was failing to place sufficient distance between the inspirational roots of the novel in the decadence and confusion of the early 1890s and his own virtuous and settled state of mind at the time that the novel was actually written fifteen years later. Although *The Man Who Was Thursday* is inspired by the confusion of the *fin de siècle*, it aspires to dispel and disperse the clouds of despondency with the piercing light of Christian clarity and charity. It cannot be stressed enough that this critical distance between the *inspirational* and *aspirational* aspects of the novel is crucial to our understanding of it. *Thursday* was written at around the same time that Chesterton was also writing *Orthodoxy*, his masterpiece of Christian apologetics, both books being published in 1908, and it is perilous to our understanding of the former book if we fail to read it in the light of the latter.

The aging Chesterton, recalling *Thursday* in the light of the darkness of his youth across the span of forty years, makes the perilous mistake of seeing the dragon of decadence and not the knight in shining orthodoxy who slays it. Thus in his autobiography he writes that "the monstrous pantomime ogre who was called Sunday in the story... is not so much God... but rather

Nature as it appears to the pantheist, whose pantheism is struggling out of pessimism," whereas, in fact, as the text testifies explicitly, Sunday refers to himself within the context of the Book of Genesis and the Days of Creation as "the Sabbath" and "the peace of God," and, as if to hammer the point home, his final words are those of Christ Himself, asking his interlocutors, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" *Pace* Chesterton, whose myopic memory misreads his own novel, Sunday reveals himself as being much more than mere Nature, much more than a mere god, but the Christian God whose presence makes sense of the nightmare nonsense that His perceived absence presents.

Seeing *Thursday* in the contemporaneous light of *Orthodoxy* and its "ethics of elfland," we can see that it encapsulates the paradox, embodied in the character of Chesterton's delightful priest detective Father Brown, that wisdom can only be found in innocence. This is nothing less than the truth that Christ teaches. We will not be with Him in heaven unless we become as little children.

The paradoxical heart of *The Man Who Was Thursday* is the tension that exists between the *childlikeness* demanded by Christ and the *childishness* that St. Paul tells us to avoid. We have to remain *child-like* by ceasing to be *childish*. The first is the wisdom of innocence, or the sanity of sanctity, whereby we see the miracle of life with eyes full of wonder; the second is the self-centeredness of one who refuses the challenge of growing-up. Chesterton's *Man Who Was Thursday* is essentially about childish detectives attaining childlike wisdom, just as his later novel, *Manalive*, illustrates how the pure childlikeness of the aptly-named Innocent Smith is misunderstood by the childish world in which he finds himself.

The Man Who Was Thursday shows us the paradoxical truth that it takes a big man to know how small he is. It shows us that thinking we are big is childish whilst knowing that we are small is childlike. Thinking we are big, the sin of pride,

turns our world into a living nightmare. Knowing we are small wakes us up. In a world that is somnambulating deeper and deeper into the living nightmare it has made for itself, we are in more need than ever of the wide-awake awareness of G. K. Chesterton, a visionary who was larger than life because he spent his life on his knees.

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Notes:

[1] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936, pp. 297-8.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

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