

Serious Humor: The Play of Style and Thought in G.K. Chesterton's Essays

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Perhaps it should be predictable that G.K. Chesterton's view of essay style is unpredictable. This is the man who is routinely accused by reviewers of being "ephemeral," "amusing," "facile," and "light,"¹ and yet who says of Oscar Wilde's style, with some distaste, that he "wrote some things that were not immorality, but merely bad taste; not the bad taste of the conservative suburbs, which merely means anything violent or shocking, but real bad taste; as in a stern subject treated in a florid style."² "Florid" is a puzzling word choice here, for it would seem to be an apt description of Chesterton's own diction and syntax, particularly in his treatment of "stern" subjects. However, in his own mind, he seems to be making a distinction between his florid and Wilde's. "Stern" is vital to this distinction, for it recalls the Chesterton of *Heretics* rejecting the antithesis between "serious" and "funny,"³ or the later Chesterton of *Orthodoxy* declaring – rather sternly himself – "mere light sophistry is the thing that I happen to despise most of all things, and it is perhaps a wholesome fact that this is the thing of which I am generally accused."⁴

If one takes "serious" and "stern" to be synonyms in his criticism of Wilde, one is left with a conundrum as to the meanings of "florid," "funny," and "light sophistry." The possibility of stark inconsistency cannot be discounted altogether; however, Chesterton is firm on the fact – and a broad reading of his work seems to corroborate – that he does not

practice that of which he accuses Wilde; his florid is not Wilde's florid, as he sees it. But what does the critic do with passages in Chesterton that, on first read, seem somewhat flippant? As in the following: "We feel that it is a disgrace to a man like Ruskin when he says, with a solemn visage, that building in iron is ugly and unreal, but that the weightiest objection is that there is no mention of it in the Bible; we feel as if he had just said he could find no hair-brushes in Habakkuk."⁵ Chesterton here declaims what he considers a subtractive brand of literalist biblical interpretation, aligning himself with Matthew Arnold's dictum, "No man, who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible,"⁶ but the humor of Chesterton's argument sets it apart. The alliterated "h," the incongruity of finding a beauty product in a minor prophet, and the awkward comedy of the word "Habakkuk," when removed from its biblical context, may make readers laugh; one senses that Chesterton would have them laugh, and yet he is, clearly, utilizing humor and, it would seem, walking the hazy line between flippant and funny. The defense for this passage's purposeful humor as opposed to Wilde's less "tasteful" style lies partially in the intent of the phrase and partially in its effect. "Hair-brushes in Habakkuk" is funny, but it is also affectively equivocal. Its incongruity may please at first, but to the biblically sensitive reader, it should also embarrass and seem both lightly blasphemous and also slightly disgraceful – the very emotions necessary to a proper affective understanding of Ruskin's shortcomings. Chesterton knows the plans he has for his comedic effect; it serves the sentence, serves the thought; or rather, it is the material of the thought, a working out of the thought, and the thought's most effective apologetic. Michael D. Hurley argues that this relationship between form and content confounds "attempts to read [Chesterton] as a thinker without first appreciating him as a writer."⁷ It will be argued here, building upon Hurley's thought, that a purposeful, cross-inflecting, often playful relationship between the form and the thought – even where the diction and syntax seem arbitrary and undisciplined – is the most recognizable trademark of Chesterton's use of humor and of his essay style more generally.

Chesterton's claim of shared feeling with his readers indicated in the first person plural subject of the first line above, "we feel as it is a disgrace," is far more convincing with humor than it would be without. To say that "we feel" a certain emotion because of Ruskin's writing is unconvincing unless the author can conjure that emotion in the reader, for in appealing to pathos, he has tossed out enthymemes and their syllogisms as useful means of argumentation; he has invoked a shared existential experience, not a rational warrant. Proving a feeling is evoking a feeling, and Chesterton's proof, just after he writes "we feel," lies primarily in his writing's ability to evoke that feeling in the reader; the mingling of the comedic, the farcical, and the blasphemous in "hairbrushes in Habakkuk," does this neatly here. Lynette Hunter tracks a comparable effect whereby Chesterton creates "in the reader a response analogous to the writer's own."⁸ But while Hunter points to places in which rational argumentation and "a marvellous sense of humour" either work together or obscure each other, the above passage demonstrates that a third category exists outside of that dichotomy. At times, Chesterton's only means of argumentation is to align the reader's emotional reactions to his own sentiments on a given subject. Any appeal to rationality – save that tacitly assumed by using written language at all – after the words "we feel" would be not only meaningless but positively harmful to his purpose.

Sceptics may be tempted to argue that Chesterton merely criticizes the humor of Wilde (and others such as Bernard Shaw, Walter Pater, "and all the aesthetes") because he thinks their philosophy "vile," "monstrous," and "very desolate."⁹ It is certainly true that the decadence Wilde represents is repulsive to Chesterton, partly because he steered so near it himself in younger days,¹⁰ partly because he believes, contra Wilde, that "The Arts exist [...] to show forth the glory of God; or, to translate the same thing in terms of our psychology, to awaken and keep alive the sense of wonder in man."¹¹ Chesterton's literary teleology is radically different from many of his contemporaries, and it must be granted that his view of Wilde's style (and of his own) is tinted by his worldview. Yet, to reduce

Chesterton's assessment of Wilde's style to his distaste for his beliefs is to impugn him as sheerly credulous, and to surrender the tacit trust in his self-conscious, stated motives. Chesterton does not call Wilde's use of "florid" language into question because his conclusions are "desolate." In fact, he anticipates this objection by explicitly denying that his objection is to the "violent" or "shocking" content of Wilde's work, which is merely "the bad taste of the conservative suburbs."¹² Chesterton's quibble is with the way in which Wilde writes about "stern" subjects.

Nevertheless, it would seem that, at times, Chesterton opens himself up to the accusation he levels at Wilde, as when he writes lines such as, "It is only when a man tumbles down that we laugh. Why do we laugh? Because it is a grave religious matter: it is the Fall of Man. Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified."¹³ Though perhaps not as uncomfortable as Malcolm Muggeridge's misquote of Chesterton – "the fall of man is the only banana skin joke carried out to cosmic proportions"¹⁴ – this passage, like the misquote, unabashedly puns on the most "stern" of subjects: sin's entrance into creation, and it smacks of a "more of gravy than of grave" category of humor. But the passage still resists a simple write-off as base flippancy, chiefly because it acknowledges that its subject is a "grave religious matter." Chesterton is aware of the implications of The Fall, which could mean that his stylistic *faux pas* is even more egregious, written in a kind of cosmic defiance; however, he could also be acknowledging the seriousness of the subject in a plea to readers not to discount the serious function of the comedic as a signpost of human dignity. If the latter is true, the passage not only redeems his use of what some might consider "base" humor, it is crippled without it. For just as the dignity of man is a prerequisite to the humor in man, the humor of the pun in "Fall of Man" is only possible because of that subject's cosmic seriousness.

This interdependence of the serious and the comedic is an extension of another more foundational belief in Chesterton worth examining; namely, that "we shall not advance an inch in any of the arguments of today till people can be induced to see that a word can only be used as a

spell, or even as a curse so long as we keep it sacred."¹⁵ This call to show great care in using words is habitual for Chesterton, and discussions of individual words' meanings often frame, introduce, or provide topics for full essays. It comes out too in calls for distinctions between "secondary words" and "primary words,"¹⁶ his condemnation of modern civilized speech which "largely consist[s] of dead words,"¹⁷ and his prophecy in verse that the heathen of the future

... shall not come with warships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands.
Not with the humour of hunters
Or savage skill in war,
But ordering all things with dead words.¹⁸

It is this "homage to words" that Kenner calls "incessant and even immoderate,"¹⁹ and what Hurley alludes to when he says, "He puts the play of words to serious work, perhaps the most serious work imaginable";²⁰ and it is also the impulse that allows him to see a pun as not only justifiable but necessary. Chesterton's etymology is not "imbalanced" in the sense that he is blindly essentialist; he is well aware of an iconoclastic, neo-modernist – as Frank Kermode defines it²¹ – view of language, as he writes that "we must keep" the word and its meaning sacred,²² not "words meanings *are* sacred." Later in the same essay he concludes that "the only remedy [to the problem of over-expanded or over-contracted word-meanings] [...] is to have a frontier, and to keep it fixed." He does not pretend that word meanings cannot change by usage and consensus; he only contends that consensus must be strong.

His push for firm, agreed meanings could be seen as a loose application to word meanings of Kant's moral argument for the existence of God: 1) Stable word meanings are rational; 2) Stable word meanings are only possible if consensus on their meanings is strong; 3) consensus can only be strong if words are held as sacred; 4) therefore, words are sacred.²³ This etymological conservatism contrasts sharply with the vision

associated with Gertrude Stein (among others), who would have words stripped of conventional meanings to have them again, raw and fresh.²⁴ Chesterton's position is not some entrenched, reactionary reduction; indeed, he writes in his own Stein-esque passage,

Have you ever tried the experiment of saying some plain word, such as "dog," thirty times? By the thirtieth time it has become a word like "snark" or "pobble." It does not become tame, it becomes wild, by repetition. In the end a dog walks about as startling and undecipherable as Leviathan or Croquemitaine.²⁵

He acknowledges the fluidity of word meanings and the interdependence of subjective experience in the handling of words, but this position does not lead him to some radical rejection of traditional meanings – the dog remains a dog in the passage – but a revitalization of them, a chance to re-experience the history of a word and its primal connection to an object or idea. The difference between the Chesterton and the Stein vision is the difference between reformation and revolution, between renovation and a complete rebuild. One might call Chesterton's position conservative, but one might as easily call it liberal, in the sense that he is allowing each word to hold not only its current meanings but also the interleaved, involuted, inter-linguistic historical meaning that word possesses. His is less iconoclastic, more fair to antiquity – what he terms the "democracy of the dead"²⁶ as opposed to the "aristocracy of time"²⁷ – and less time-prejudiced. Moreover, his work is far richer if he protects and takes great interest in the survival of layered word meanings, for much of his writing lives on chance connections between words' meanings, pseudo-meanings, sounds, and historical significance.

It is worth, therefore, exploring further this unflagging attention to word usage and word meaning that is the foundation for a great deal of his style. In addition to his recognition of the fluidity of word meanings over time through cultural shifts in usage, Chesterton also understands the complexity involved in an individual reader's encounter with a text:

One need not be so idealistically irrational as a modern psychologist, in order to admit that the very shape and sound of words do make a difference, even in the baldest prose, as they do in the most beautiful poetry. We cannot quite prevent the imagination from remembering irrelevant associations even in the abstract sciences like mathematics.²⁸

If his admission that the meanings of words are arbitrary and culturally formed is an anticipation of neo-modernist concerns, this passage nods (though not too vigorously) not only back at Walter Pater's argument for the individual's power to interpret meaning and see the text or artistic "object as in itself it really is,"²⁹ but also at what Stanley Fish and others would expand and dogmatize forty years later: that the reader plays a vital role in the meaning of any passage, that each individual's analogical and interpretive experience is a unique "mediating presence" that not only alters meaning, but forms it.³⁰ The Chesterton-Pater-Fish parallel should not be taken too far. Chesterton may acknowledge the reader's participation in word meaning, but he as vigorously defends words' meanings as something separate from their usage or interpretation: as when he inveighs against "the habit of the educated, when dealing with a word, to hit it before they look at it. They will say they are against doctrine; which (if you look at the word) means they are against education."³¹ He goes on to list other words that are used improperly, which seems to indicate that he is unwilling to take belief in the readers' meaning-making to the level of definition-making. Readers mediate word meanings; they do not dictate them. Of course, this passage is early in his writing life, but even twenty years later he would be writing about "the natural meaning of the word Development" in reference to Catholic doctrine.³² These passages, if compared to the Fish-esque exposition of reader response, could show a simple inconsistency and lack of rigorous thinking on the subject. It may be more helpful to see the difference between the passages as a difference in emphasis. Writing, "we cannot quite prevent the imagination from

remembering irrelevant associations,” is in no way handing over word meaning to readers, but only acknowledging – begrudgingly at that, for he implies that he would prevent it if he could – that readers *will* not conform to established denotation. As has been shown, this does not inhibit Chesterton from criticizing readers who will not conform. His essays and books take it upon themselves consistently to offer Johnsonesque commentary on and definitions of individual words such as “reverence,” “mister,” “traveler,” “Nordic,” “conservative,” “secular,” “asceticism,” “loyalty,” “vandalism,” “property,” “high,” “pessimism,” “imperialism,” “progress,” and “town,” among many others.³³ This deep care for words becomes habitual for him and is a hallmark of his essays, motivated by something between a “collector’s mania” and the concern of a life-long caretaker.³⁴

These etymological apologies show an interest in and care for the layered, culturally constructed, and reader-informed meanings of words, and this can help to explain Chesterton’s criticism of Wilde’s style as in bad taste, and, beyond this, his understanding of essay style generally. Any given Chesterton essay offers evidence of an author running through the various meanings – etymological, or equivocal – of the words he pens, and the development of his argument at least partially on that basis. Because so many of Chesterton’s arguments are built on equivocation, analogical correspondence, sound resemblance, fine distinction, and historical definitions of words, he has a vested interest in a careful view of language and language use. It may be, then, that when he accuses Wilde of being “Florid” he is not criticizing florid writing as a negative in itself – Chesterton commonly writes what could be considered “florid” – but as a symptom common with those who trample on word meanings. Like a concerned parent, he seems to trust himself with flippancy, with humor, and with “long and prosy” sentences because he usually handles them with such dexterity. But he is at the same time wary of those traits in the writing of those less able and less aware of the intricacies involved in word-craft and the delicate relationship between humor and “stern” subjects.³⁵

And yet Chesterton's feeling moves, at times, from a distrust to a sincere distaste for authors who use humor or wit to disseminate what he considers wrongheaded ideas and exert influence on readers who might believe them. Again, he writes of Wilde:

When he said somewhere that an immoral woman is the sort of woman a man never gets tired of, he used a phrase so baseless as to be perfectly pointless. Everybody knows that a man may get tired of a whole procession of immoral women, especially if he is an immoral man. That was "a Thought"; otherwise something to be uttered, with uplifted hand, to people who could not think at all. In their poor muddled minds there was some vague connection between wit and cynicism; so they never applauded him so warmly as a wit, as when he was cynical without being witty.³⁶

Here the objection seems to lie in Wilde's worldview rather than his treatment of the subject; yet, as is made clear in the remainder of the passage, Chesterton's unaccustomed sternness – even his alliteration on "perfectly pointless," typically a means of softening his rhetoric, only increases the sense of words spat out in disgust – is due less to his repulsion at Wilde's idea than at his use of "wit" in connection with what he considers untruth. Indeed, he denies that wit is present here or in any passage that does not exist in the context of serious thought. This claim of Wilde's lack of wit is sufficiently disdainful in the simple context of this passage; however, when considered in light of Chesterton's own distinction between humor and wit made elsewhere, it becomes scathing:

Wit is always connected with the idea that truth is close and clear. Humor, on the other hand, is always connected with the idea that truth is tricky and mystical and easily mistaken [...]. Humour is akin to agnosticism, which is only the negative side of mysticism. But pure wit is akin to Puritanism; to the perfect and painful consciousness of the final fact in the universe. Very briefly, the man who

sees the consistency in things is a wit – and a Calvinist.
The man who sees the inconsistency in things is a
humorist – and a Catholic.³⁷

Chesterton's claim, then, seems to be that Wilde neither has the rigor to be a wit – something lesser, by his own distinction – nor the healthy mysticism to be a humorist. In another passage, he argues that "Sterne and Dickens have really owed their place by the fireside, not to the fact that they were humorous, but to the fact that they were serious, that all their jokes were bubbles upon a great sea of sympathy."³⁸ The same could be said of Chesterton, or at least his general conception of his own philosophy of writing and, as has been seen, of others'. In his view, those who are not willing to base their humor or wit on substantial, "serious" thought should not be classed as humorists or wits.³⁹

W.H. Auden, perhaps unfairly, calls Chesterton's style *belles-lettres*: "a repetitious and self-indulgent 'show-off' of the writer's personality and stylistic mannerisms."⁴⁰ Chesterton, as has been pointed out, seems to be making the same complaint about Wilde and any other essayist who either writes pure, vacuous frivolity, or who makes "a joke without taking part in it."⁴¹ In order to "show off," it is necessary to separate one's self from others enough to be seen. Chesterton rejects this detachment and, rather, calls for a full participation in human emotion as a prerequisite to humor. That is not to say Chesterton never indulges in showmanship or repetitious "self-indulgent" foppery. A man who wrote as many words (and as quickly) as Chesterton is bound to have a certain amount of gristle with his meat; and this is especially obvious when he shows his prejudice against intellectuals, calling them in one place "a blight and a desolation both to their families and also to mankind," and adding in a mock show of fairness, "some good people are almost poets and some bad poets are almost professors."⁴² The near-chiasmus parallelism with the unexpected addition of professors where readers expect "good people" may be clever, but it is unnecessary to his argument, vague in meaning, and ultimately convolutes an already over-generalized thought. Chesterton aligns his writing with Auden's

complaint again in his too-cute defense of drinking alcohol in which he argues, "Probably the worst way to drink is to drink medicinally. Certainly the safest way to drink is to drink carelessly; that is, without caring much for anything, and especially not caring for the drink."⁴³ It is a paradox that works on an equivocal definition and can be explained, but it depends too much on an over-stretched definition of "carelessly," and readers may feel that he chooses that word for its ability to provoke rather than from a belief that it is most fitting. Though the cases are rare, he even writes epigrams that do not live up to his own standards, such as, "A great classic means a man whom one can praise without having read."⁴⁴ There is no way of knowing whether he is consciously parroting the far more succinct and successful Mark Twain line from *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar* ("Classic: a book which people praise and don't read"),⁴⁵ but the cynical, Juvenalian satire native to Twain and forgivable in him (it is almost his native tongue), is alien and uncomplementary to Chesterton – in addition to being lightly hypocritical. Moreover, at times he seems almost to advocate fatuousness, as when he writes that "every joke is a senseless joke. A joke is by its nature a protest against sense. It is no good attacking nonsense for being successfully nonsensical."⁴⁶

One should be careful, however, before one leaps to the conclusion that he is somehow in opposition to purposeful humor. For as is usual with his writing, the meaning of his thought hinges on a definition of a particular word; in this instance, "nonsense." Taken in the context of the other passages mentioned above, it is unlikely that "nonsense" here is synonymous with "without sense" or "useless." Rather, he seems to see it as a kind of category or genre, like epic or ballad or at least an attitude of the speaker, like elegy. A piece of nonsense writing, as Chesterton sees it, may still mean a temporary abandonment of reason within its own "enclave" as Peter Berger writes of play spaces,⁴⁷ but not an abandonment of the reasonable ends or goals of that writing; it still has a teleology. Perhaps this understanding is clarified most in other places where Chesterton writes, "Nonsense ought to be suggestive; but nowadays it is

abortive,”⁴⁸ and, “But even in nonsense there is a need for logic and consistency.”⁴⁹ If “nonsense” is taken here to mean “without sense” or “useless” the sentence itself becomes nonsensical by its own definition, for something truly senseless can suggest nothing but an absence of intelligibility and, by extension, the absence of teleology.

Theodor Adorno, in his study of the essay form, writes that “luck and play are essential in the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve [...]. Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a first principle.”⁵⁰ If applied to Chesterton’s essays, this statement is in the odd place of both describing them tidily and missing their point altogether, for they do indeed thrive on “luck and play” – on chance metaphorical connections, sometimes based on a passing or shadowy resemblance between the look, sound, or meaning of words or of the ideas and objects they signify. However, this luck and play are not on the one side of some binary between the trivial and the foundational. They serve and are subordinate to his foundational principles. Their telos is, as Adorno writes elsewhere, “not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory” but to see in the transitory, the eternal.⁵¹ Chesterton demonstrates this synthesis in the following passage:

The truth is that any advance in science leaves morality in its ancient balance; and it depends still on the inscrutable soul of man whether any discovery is mainly a benefit or mainly a calamity. This is, perhaps, the strongest argument for a morality superior to materialism, and a religion that refuses to be bullied by science. Moral progress must still be made morally; and a modern scientist who has invented the most complex mechanism, or liberated the most subtle gas, has still exactly the same spiritual problem before him as that which confronted Cain, when he stood with a ragged stone in his hand.⁵²

He may not “begin with Adam and Eve,” but he is only one generation removed. Perhaps one could call the connection between the “complex mechanism,” “the most subtle gas,” and Cain’s “ragged stone”

lucky; though that word, if examined, breaks down, for it is unable to capture the skill, thought, and practiced style involved in the work. Still, if it does not fully describe Chesterton's writing process or compositional planning, it may go farther in describing his readers' perception of his planning. He may have planned to make this turn before he began writing, but the temporal leap he takes is still unexpected and disorienting and, as a result, deceptively spontaneous. Adding to this, the paragraph above does not end his essay, but is penultimate, leaving it less vulnerable to the suspicion of author-planning that may plague a last line or paragraph. None of this is to argue that the analogy may not be spontaneous – that knowledge is beyond the critic's ken – but only to propose that it creates the effect of spontaneity by springing up unexpectedly. Readers understand the rare nature of such a hyperbolic yet appropriate link between the primal technology of a stone and some engineered modern weapon.

This is the kind of analogical thinking Hurley describes when he argues that Chesterton's "arguments do not ultimately depend on empirical proof or logical reasoning but on unexpected chance connections."⁵³ Again, the word "chance," like "luck," only goes so far in describing something that is more like a long-studied, long-fostered, and cultivated innate skill for analogical thinking. Here Adorno's word "play" (*Spiel*), which Hurley too uses elsewhere in regard to Chesterton's technique,⁵⁴ seems to be most helpful, for it captures the lightness of the act but also the author's participation in it and its underlying need of a structure. "Play" is a word that Chesterton might choose himself to describe the process by which he makes analogical leaps, millennia in length. For by his own definition of play it is "the most serious thing in the world,"⁵⁵ in that it requires both the imagination and an ordering of the intellect. Readers see a similar thought process in his defense of moral fables for children, in which he argues that a child "very often [...] likes the moral more than the fable."⁵⁶

Again, Chesterton's convictions about play work on a very specific definition of that word; or, in this case, a disambiguation of it. He does

not, like Schiller, believe that play should “suppress all coercion, and will set man free physically and morally.”⁵⁷ His view is nearer Nietzsche’s claim that the “maturity” in an individual “means to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play.”⁵⁸ Chesterton aligns play near to “pure pleasure,” like Schiller, but he also asserts that “Play at least is always serious,”⁵⁹ for one can “play only with ideas that are very necessary and permanent.”⁶⁰ Play is, in other words, something at the same time heavy and light, limited and free, serious and humorous.⁶¹ And here is where Chesterton and Adorno diverge, for the play of which Adorno speaks, by Chesterton’s definition, requires that an author “deduce from” first principles or “arrive at” first principles, for those principles are, *per se*, the primal building blocks with which the author plays. Play cannot function properly if it deals solely in secondary, derived, or inessential concepts and things, though as both Chesterton and Adorno recognize, one may move from the secondary to the primary. In this sense, then, the analogical leap between the moral dilemma of twentieth-century technological progress and the story of the first murder is a playful act. Adding to this, lest any reader miss the foundational nature of the claim, Chesterton names the decision before Cain, and, by extension, before the scientists, “spiritual.”

The difference, then, between Chesterton’s method and that which Adorno points to is the difference between use and integration, between utilization and assimilation. An essayist in the Adorno mode might utilize a foundational concept as an occasion to speak his mind or demonstrate his wit, but that concept remains separate and visible. Chesterton, in the passage above and in many others, does not so much use the foundational as often as he assumes it, making it a fully incorporated ingredient, necessary in the truly playful and the truly humorous, and worked out at the sentence level; for, as he claims in another essay, he believes that “in all arguments there is a first principle and a first deduction.”⁶² György Lukács may come nearer than Adorno to the posture of the Chestertonian essay when he observes that the great irony of the essayist is that he is “always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which

implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life."⁶³ Like all such general statements, it is less applicable than it claims and requires a whole bevvvy of qualifications; nonetheless, like the word "luck," it describes well the general appearance of Chesterton's essays as they are experienced by individual readers; what lies underneath that appearance, however, is something far more involved, integrated, and nuanced.⁶⁴

This link between the playful and the foundational is even more visible in Chesterton's treatment of humor and the humorous, which may be approached here most helpfully by placing it in conversation with that of Henri Bergson. If squared-off in debate, Bergson and Chesterton would most likely differ radically, but in their thoughts on humor they work on similar premises. Chesterton writes, "only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified."⁶⁵ Bergson, in a similar vein argues, "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable."⁶⁶ Bergson does not go so far as to say that it is human dignity or the divine stamp upon man that lies at the heart of his statement, but both he and Chesterton acknowledge a certain connection between something human and something comic. The difference comes when Bergson lays out a fictional situation in which "passers-by burst out laughing" at a "man running along the street" who "stumbles and falls." Following this, he declares that the spectators "laugh because his sitting down is involuntary."⁶⁷ Bergson's theory is a necessary consequence of his belief that "gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine," and that humor is less pleasant than it is dehumanizing and mechanizing.⁶⁸ Chesterton, on the other hand, in an illustration suspiciously similar – almost as if he is responding directly to Bergson – writes:

If you really ask yourself why we laugh at a man sitting down suddenly in the street you will discover that the reason is not only recondite, but ultimately religious. All the jokes about men sitting down on their hats are really

theological jokes; they are concerned with the Dual Nature of Man. They refer to the primary paradox that man is superior to all the things around him and yet is at their mercy.⁶⁹

Bergson's view of humor forms a spectrum between the human and the machine and argues that certain types of humor deprive a human of humanness and turn him into a machine; something laughable, but, more importantly, something less. Chesterton's view is, in one sense, more liberal, for he sees humor, not as a dehumanizing force (or a signal of dehumanization), but as one of the chief indications that humans have a divine stamp. He writes elsewhere in a perhaps overly-dismissive but important criticism of Bergson-esque thinking: "it is typical of the mechanistic moderns that, even when they try to imagine a live thing, they can only think of a mechanical metaphor from a dead thing."⁷⁰ Seriousness and humor, for Chesterton, rather than being two sides of an antithesis – one solemn, dignified, and of great value and the other mechanizing, dehumanizing and frivolous – are in a complementary relationship in which, to borrow Bergson's wording, "Gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of its divine origin"; or, as Chesterton himself puts it in somewhat more sweeping language, "All real fun is in cosmic contrasts, which involve a view of the cosmos."⁷¹ Humor is, to Chesterton, alive and life-giving to an argument or to a person, not objectifying and mechanizing. The greater the truth or mystical significance, for Chesterton, the greater the opportunity for what one might call serious humor, or the kind of humor which grows as the significance of its subject grows: "A jocular thing never lives to be stale unless it is also serious."⁷²

Perhaps the strongest defense for this view of humor in Chesterton can be found in the actual moments spangling his essays in which, without drawing attention to the move, he intermingles the foundational, the comic, and the witty ambiguously and effectively:

Stark staring incredulity is a far more loyal tribute to
[Jesus' claim of divinity] than a modernist metaphysic

that would make it out merely a matter of degree. It were better to rend our robes with a great cry against blasphemy, like Caiaphas in the judgment, or to lay hold of the man as a maniac possessed of devils like the kinsmen and the crowd, rather than to stand stupidly debating fine shades of pantheism in the presence of so catastrophic a claim. There is more of the wisdom that is one with surprise in any simple person, full of the sensitiveness of simplicity, who should expect the grass to wither and the birds to drop dead out of the air, when a strolling carpenter's apprentice said calmly and almost carelessly, like one looking over his shoulder: "Before Abraham was, I am."⁷³

The passage circles around the last line, moving ever closer to it with each parallelism, navigating between the humorous, the mythic, and the solemn. It is a prose-variation on what Hurley calls Chesterton's "Tennysonian technique of circling" found in his poetry,⁷⁴ only here using parallel phrases: "Stark staring incredulity is far better"; "It were better to rend our robes"; "There is more wisdom." The phrases are parallel in sentiment but growing in intensity, partly through the fact that they exist next to one another and therefore build upon one another, but also in the intensity of their images. The first appropriate reaction to Jesus' claims Chesterton describes as a "stark staring incredulity," a response, though strong, almost universally applicable. "Stark staring incredulity" might register on the face of a person who was spat at, or who encountered an embarrassing relation in a professional setting. One can imagine it applied to situations less earth-shattering than a claim to be consubstantial with the unmoved mover. Moreover, "stark, staring, incredulity" is only lightly humorous – and ambiguously humorous, edging on polemical – and any comic momentum building during the two-consonant alliteration dies with the five syllable, flattening omnibus of "incredulity." It is more difficult to imagine a situation that corresponds to the second reaction Chesterton sees as requisite ("to rend our robes with a great cry of blasphemy"), in part

because of cultural shifts from that day to this, but also because it is, by its nature, more extreme. It is one thing to stand and show one's displeasure by a facial reaction. It is another to act. Again, the humor of this image is far from straightforward; rending of robes is a fairly common first-century Jewish practice, and not shocking to the biblically literate. So, in one sense, the image is conventional but still powerful for its emotion; in another sense, it is comic, for Chesterton not only asks us to picture Caiaphas tearing his robes, but to picture ourselves and any others ("rend *our robes*" [italics mine]) who are aware of Jesus' claim, doing the same – a collective, simultaneous cry and tear, not of suits, t-shirts, and blazers but robes. The image may avoid bathos because its intended effect is unclear; its comedy and its solemnity intermingle and become almost indistinguishable. Following the first two, Chesterton's images grow progressively extreme in action. Readers are encouraged to move from tearing their "robes" to mob violence: laying "hold of the man as a maniac possessed of devils," and, finally, to a belief in material consequences – "the grass to wither and the birds to drop dead out of the air" – for blasphemous words. As with the actions of the robe tearing and the incredulous staring, the emotions evoked in readers with these images, especially that of mass-expiring, falling birds may be mixed. Not as directly apocalyptic as, say, a third of the stars falling from the sky, a rain of birds is, at the same, time startlingly wild and startlingly prosaic. Wild because, unlike the tearing of robes, the seizing of the demon possessed, and even the grass withering, it is not a direct reference to any biblical trope or image; it is a break in a referential trend – except, of course, the raincloud of quail in Numbers, which seems to be an incidental, though interesting, parallel.⁷⁵ Prosaic because a storm of birds, while unsavory and unsettling is not a particularly destructive judgment from on high. Neither, for that matter, is the drying up of grass (an almost domestic tribulation). It has what Chesterton claims for all effective humor: a footing in the solemn and the dogmatic. What comedy it has is made possible by the cosmic significance of its subject and the generally solemn tone of the passage. However, the apex of the passage's

humor comes with the final phrase, "when a strolling carpenter's apprentice said calmly and almost carelessly, like one looking over his shoulder: 'Before Abraham was, I am.'" Like "hairbrushes in Habakkuk," a "strolling" Jesus "carelessly" claiming eternity and perfect, underived being, acts in varying, even opposite ways on the reader. It can be reacted to as revisionist and blasphemous, as decentering and refreshing, and (as a result of the first two) comic. It is also defamiliarizing,⁷⁶ reverberating beyond the single quotation and altering Jesus' tone in other well-known passages: "This day this scripture is fulfilled in your ears," "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do," and "It is finished," if said "almost carelessly, like one looking over his shoulder" take on novel, even frightful new meaning, both unsettling and resensitizing.⁷⁷ Its comedy is contingent upon its readers' perception of the solemnness of the subject, or rather tangled up *with* a solemn subject and, as a result, modified into something, if not more serious, at least more perspective bending. Here again, Chesterton ends by invoking in the reader (or at least in this reader) the emotion he claims that a Bible reader should have about Jesus' claims: a kind of imbalanced distaste and a sense of comedy.

It is difficult for the reader to hold Chesterton's passage, or any of those above, at arm's length, for – assuming a suspension of disbelief – one is forced into a small-scale existential crisis which demands an explanation. Chesterton's emotional, even humorous effect is bound to the argument of the passage and lives or dies with it. C.S. Lewis describes well the interaction between humor and thought in Chesterton's work, writing that his humor "is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the 'bloom' on the dialectic itself."⁷⁸ It is an astute observation, and all the more for couching itself in self-consciously analogical terms. When readers and critics examine Chesterton's work while presuming such a separation, terms like "facile" and "ephemeral" begin to appear and further negate what is, for Chesterton, a serious interdependence, vital to an understanding of his work.

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Notes

¹ For “ephemeral” and “amusing” See *G.K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, ed. D.J. Conlon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 71, 263; John Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (Hull, England: Hull University Press, 1984), 1; A.L. Maycock, “Introduction,” in *The Man Who Was Orthodox*, by G.K. Chesterton, ed. A.L. Maycock (London: D. Dobson, 1963), 13; For “facile” see G.K. Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*, ed. D.J. Conlon (Antwerp: Antwerp Studies in English Literature, 1976), 214; For “light” see Banshi Dahar, *G.K. Chesterton and the Twentieth-Century English Essay* (New Delhi, 1977), 13-34; James R. Simmons, “G.K. Chesterton,” *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. Tracy Chevalier (London: 1997), 175; for a general condemnation, see “Introduction,” Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *Paradox in Chesterton* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), xxii.

² G.K. Chesterton. *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 15, *Chesterton on Dickens, The Victorian Age in Literature*, ed. Alzina Stone Dale (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 519.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 1, *Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 150.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:315.

⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 15:489-90.

⁶ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113. Chesterton and Arnold’s agreement is a rare occurrence and worth pointing out.

⁷ Michael D. Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton* (Devon, U.K.: Northcote House, 2012), xiii.

⁸ Lynette Hunter, *G.K. Chesterton: Explorations in Allegory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 40.

⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:106; G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 11, *Collected Plays and Chesterton on Shaw*, comp. Denis J. Conlon (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 371, 404-5; Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:94.

¹⁰ See G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Randall Paine (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 97-98: "There is something truly menacing in the thought of how quickly I could imagine the maddest, when I had never committed the mildest crime. Something may have been due to the atmosphere of the Decadents [...] but anyhow, it is true that there was a time when I had reached that condition of moral anarchy within, in which a man says, in the words of Wilde, that 'Atys with the blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am.'"

¹¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 3:173.

¹² The pejorative here seems to be "conservative" not "suburbs." See G.K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London: Bodley Head, 1904), 72; G.K. Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton at the Daily News: Literature, Liberalism and Revolution, 1901-1913*, ed. Julia Stapleton, 8 Vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 5:328; G.K. Chesterton, *G.K.C. as M.C.* (London: Methuen, 1929), 31-32.

¹³ G.K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (New York: J. Lane, 1913), 204.

¹⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 69. This writer could not track this quote in any Chesterton work.

¹⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 29, *Illustrated London News 1911-1913* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 445-49.

¹⁶ Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men*, 286.

¹⁷ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 215.

¹⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, ed. Bernadette Sheridan (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 166.

¹⁹ Kenner, *Paradox in Chesterton*, 50.

²⁰ Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton*, 12.

²¹ See Frank Kermode, "Modernisms," *Encounter*, March 1996, 58, UNZ. I choose his theory because it is neither over-reductive of the movement nor nuanced past the point of usefulness.

²² Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 29:449.

²³ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 225, n. 23.

²⁴ Alan Golding writes of Stein's desire to "strip away layers of received meaning, clean words of their received associations." One might also include William Carlos Williams among the "others." Anne Dewey discusses Williams' ideas of freeing words and objects "from conventionally ordered structures so as to 'improvise novelty,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, ed. Walter B. Kalaidjian (Cambridge UP, 2015), 43, 67.

²⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions* (London: Methuen, 1910), E-Book, 16.

²⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:357.

²⁷ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 11:424-25.

²⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, *The Everlasting Man*, *St. Francis of Assisi*, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 518.

²⁹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: 1873), viii.

³⁰ Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1 October 1970), 123.

³¹ Chesterton, *Daily News*, 8:212.

³² G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 3, *Where All Roads Lead*, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, *Why I am a Catholic*, *The Thing*, *The Well and the Shadows*, *The Way of the Cross* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 7.

³³ (In the order given) Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:85; G.K. Chesterton, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, *Christendom in Dublin*, *Irish Impressions*, *The New Jerusalem*, *A Short History of England*, *The Patriotic Idea*, *Explaining the English*, *London*, *What are Reprisals?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 489; G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Randall Paine (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 306. Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 2: 483, 3:220, 388; 29:456; Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 139; Chesterton, *Daily*

R. Eric Tippin, "The Play of Style and Thought in G.K. Chesterton's Essays"

News, 2:344, 328; 8:212, 4:5; G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 1.

³⁴ This phrase, as first encountered by this writer, was used in regard to Kipling's prose, but it applies as well here. See Stephen Gwynn, "The Madness of Mr. Kipling" in *Kipling: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 213.

³⁵ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 29:448.

³⁶ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 3:172. See also Chesterton, *Daily News*, 4:14, 5:343.

³⁷ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 11:380-81.

³⁸ Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Orthodox*, 83.

³⁹ For a further treatment/definition of wit in Chesterton see also Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 11:431; Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:169-70; Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions*, 85; Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 2:473; Chesterton, *Daily News*, 5:330-31. For a further treatment/definition of humor in Chesterton, see also Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 1:157-67; 3:348-50; 11:477; 15:100-101, 188, 195; 20:519-20.

⁴⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *G.K. Chesterton: A Selection from His Non-fictional Prose*, ed. W.H. Auden (London: Faber, 1970), 12.

⁴¹ Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions*, 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴³ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 235. A similar argument can also be found in Chesterton, *Collected Works* 1:91-92, 11:385, 15:162-63.

⁴⁴ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 259.

⁴⁵ Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1899), 245.

⁴⁶ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 149.

⁴⁷ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1969), 76.

⁴⁸ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 29:53.

⁴⁹ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 11:366.

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 93.

⁵¹ Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*, 99. Adorno finishes the phrase “it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal.” This might be a bridge too far for Chesterton. Still, in Adorno’s defense of the transitory, he and Chesterton find some common ground, though Chesterton’s Thomism, which upholds both particular and universal in sacramental complementarity, forms a synthesis of the transitory and eternal that Adorno does not address directly in “The Essay as Form.”

⁵² G.K. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Dale Ahlquist, Joseph Pearce, and Aidan Mackey (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2011), 315.

⁵³ Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton*, 53.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 164.

⁵⁶ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 52.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York, 1910), xiv. Schiller does allow that play should involve an interaction with the foundational principle of beauty.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: MacMillan, 1907), 39.

⁵⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 18, *Carlyle, Tolstoy, Stevenson, Chaucer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 81.

⁶⁰ Chesterton, *Daily News*, 2:172.

⁶¹ For a further treatment of these tensions in the idea of play, see J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 9, 11, 45; Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 77, 90; Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1969), 76-79.

⁶² Chesterton, *Daily News*, 4:1.

⁶³ György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bastock (London: Merlin, 1974), 9. Later in the essay he steps back from the implications of this remark, writing, “Two essays can never contradict one another: each creates a different world” (11).

⁶⁴ It is not within the scope of this essay to deal extensively in the labyrinthine world of essay theory, but many other scholars have spoken to this subject as well. For essay as non-foundational or pseudo-foundational see Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French, eds., *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 16, 23, 102, 110-15; Michael Hamburger, "Essay über den Essay," *Akzente* 12 (1965), 290-92, 290; Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), 4, 23; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Emerson and the Essay," in *Estimating Emerson*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 568; Scott Russell Sanders, "The Practice of Some Contemporary Essayists," in *The Essay*, ed. Paul Heilker, (Urbana, 1996), 172. For essay defined or approximated by play see *Essayists on the Essay*, xviii, 26, 63, 97; Sanders, *The Essay*, 172.

⁶⁵ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 204.

⁶⁶ Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁹ Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 140-42.

⁷⁰ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 2:423.

⁷¹ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 11:483.

⁷² Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 20:519-20.

⁷³ Chesterton, *Collected Works*, 2:329-30

⁷⁴ Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton*, 42.

⁷⁵ See Numbers 11:4-35.

⁷⁶ Alison Milbank seems to have been the first to apply the term "defamiliarization" to Chesterton's work. Hurley's application of it, however, is more extensive. See Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 37; Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton*, 5. Shklovsky's term is often translated "estrangement" as well, though it has – with its overtones of alienation – been passed over, wisely it seems, by Hurley and Milbank.

⁷⁷ See Luke 4:21, Luke 23:34, John 19:30.

⁷⁸ C.S. Lewis, "I did not know what I was letting myself in for," in *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*, ed. D.J. Conlon (Antwerp: Antwerp Studies in English Literature, 1976), 513.

