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Chesterton: The Youthful Joy

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Chesterton: The Youthful Joy

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In a wry moment Wordsworth remarked that "the child is father to the man." The insight which he meant to convey was that by some undesired mental growth we have the nasty habit of losing our youthful joy, acceptance and wonder. The process of maturation jades our vision; the awful sense of loneliness, of isolation from our environment, enters and warps all hope, banishes all our better dreams. In this era, "of new inventions, for killing bodies and for saving souls, all propagated with best intentions," we find it hard to view with delight any spontaneous action, to deal kindly with the joyous man who is probably blind; and are forever conscious of the pall of gloom that hangs over happiness."

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We have been taught to question joy: melancholy is the norm. If we are prepared for suffering and unhappiness, the shock when it comes will be small. It is joy that fades; sorrow, like the poor, we have always with us. Chesterton rose like an anachronistic Chaucer to point out with a mocking smile that it is only the idealist who expects to discover happiness; that where there is no joy we should bring joy, and we will find joy. To carry sorrow on our backs is to predetermine our vision; it is hard to view a sunny sky with such a load. And in any event, we will at least see the bombs before they land.

The difference between Chesterton and other writers might be said to be one of intellectual maturity. And part of this maturity consists in the fact that he always retained the wonder of the child. Many writers, friend and foe alike, point this out as one of the most loveable and fascinating aspects of the man.

Chesterton himself in his autobiography describes childhood as the real life, the real beginning of consciousness, to deny which would be to deny a part of oneself. To the adult it often seems like a lost experience in the land of the living, an unreal prelude to maturity. But it is only the child, Chesterton notes, that knows the value of both the real and the ideal world, and who can mingle contentedly the aspects of both.

When a modern author writes of his despair and seems to have forgotten the lost childhood, he has already swept from consideration half of experience. Chesterton retains this vision of youth even in his twilight. In his novels, notably The Man Who Was Thursday and The Napoleon of Notting Hill, together with the delightful Fr. Brown stories, the reader often
has to pause and rub his mental eyes, glancing self-consciously about to re-affirm his previous conception of things. He knows that the fictional world of Chesterton is just that, yet he wonders. The implausible events of the author's books are made to seem real to those who have but a portion of Chesterton's unique vision. For something of our own childhood remains always with us, waiting to be recalled.

Chesterton combined the youth's love of argumentation with the child's faculty of remaining friendly with those who would change his opinion. Who does not recall the image of seeing children squabbling over candy one second and sharing it the next? Among Chesterton's closest personal friends were two of his most rabid intellectual opponents, Shaw and Wells. These men often debated together and rarely agreed, yet maintained a genuine admiration for each other.

For enemies too are part of life, and there is a real fascination with life in all of Chesterton's writings. He is no callous contemporary; he is never disgusted with the world, only disappointed. He looks for beauty in all of creation and since "love never wanteth shifts" he usually finds this beauty. Compare his writings on feminine beauty, for example, with those of many modern authors. Chesterton does not see beauty through the sex-filled eyes of the neo-Freudian nor does he see it through the eyes of an extreme ascetic who views all women as detriments to the salvation of mankind. His vision is that of St. Thomas Aquinas, who held that nothing natural is of itself evil.

This leads us to two of his books that deal with subjects seemingly contradictory in their beliefs: Aquinas and St. Francis of Assisi. But when viewed in light of Chesterton's philosophy they are not. For Chesterton was what we might call a romantic realist. That is, he knew the difference between what ought to be and what is so; what can be valid for a select few and what can be valid for the many. He could hope for the best and expect the worst, without contradiction. St. Francis appealed to the romantic side of Chesterton, the side that would adjure the chaotic aspects of civilized existence; Aquinas appealed to the rational side, the one which knew and accepted the order of the universe. In his treatment of St. Francis, Chesterton makes a point that is not easy to forget: that Francis did not give up the good things of life because he felt they were evil in themselves—if he had done so for this reason there would have been no especial merit, for such was his duty—but because in themselves they were good, and desirable. His way of life was not for all. But he was true to a personal vision, to a vision of youth; and so was Chesterton.

Chesterton was by no means fault-
less; he was often over-effusive and perhaps stressed his points too much. At times he was unrealistic, at others playful or cute. But his vices were the innocent ones of a child. Self-assurance and enthusiasm are merely out of fashion today. For Chesterton can be read if only to refresh minds troubled by the staleness of life, by the chains of regimented depression. In Chesterton they will find a person who hated melancholy and uniformity just as they did when they were children.

ROBERT G. RITZ: TWO POEMS

TIME REVISITED

(with due respect to P. B. Shelley)
I met a traveler from a southern land
Who said: Two vast and rocketless platforms
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a battered nose cone lies, which form,
And contour, and steel of cold command,
Tell that its inventor well those passions read
Which yet survive (stamped on these lifeless things),
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the launching pad these words appear:
"My name is Juniper XXVII, missile of missiles;
Look on my potentialities, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and once-radioactive sands stretch far away.

SAYS WHO?

The soil anchors and nourishes the plant.
The plant grows, propagates and feeds the animal.
The animal accomplishes these and moves about freely.
Man combines all these characteristics . . . and thinks, too!