LAUGHTER IN PARADISE:

G.K. Chesterton and Humour

A Collection of Papers presented at a conference of the Australian Chesterton Society on 21 October 2017 at Campion College Australia

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Karl Schmude

Welcome to the 2017 Chesterton conference at Campion College. I would like to highlight the coincidence of these names, **Chesterton** and **Campion**, which has an echo in Australian history, and particularly Australian Catholic history. In the early 1930s, the Campion Society was founded as Australia's first lay association for Catholic adult education. It began in Melbourne and spread throughout Australia. In Western Australia it adopted the name, the Chesterton Club, so it is doubly fitting that the Australian Chesterton Society, founded in the West many decades later (the early 1990s) – through the great initiative of Mr Tony Evans, now retired in England - should again be hosting a conference at Campion College.

The theme of this conference is '**Laughter in Paradise'**, with our general focus being on Chesterton and humour. There may seem something faintly absurd about spending a day looking seriously at humour. While there will hopefully be many laughs, our principal purpose is to make a serious attempt to explore the meaning and significance of humour in various guises - historically, spiritually, culturally, emotionally - with some connection to Chesterton.

We can be emboldened by the unquestionable fact that Chesterton himself took humour very seriously. As his most recent biographer, Ian Ker, put it, the *seriousness* of humour is one of the most prominent themes in his writings.

What did humour mean to Chesterton? We know that his writings are full of good humour, even when they don't necessarily make us laugh, but the overwhelming impression from any exposure to Chesterton is that humour was central to his understanding and love of life, and to his appreciation of happiness. As Franz Kafka noted of Chesterton – Kafka, famous for his novels of alienation and existential gloom: he was 'so happy that one might almost believe he had found God.' (One could imagine Kafka as a judge saying to Chesterton: 'To this charge of happiness, Mr Chesterton, how do you plead – guilty or not guilty?' 'Guilty, my Lord' would have been his unhesitating reply.)

Chesterton was invited to contribute the entry on 'humour' to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* - the 14th edition in 1929. Humour was for him a way of appreciating and interpreting reality. It was not marginal or incidental to his outlook, nor was it a diversion. It was fundamental to his understanding of human life and destiny. As he wrote in his great study of human and divine history, *The Everlasting Man*: 'Alone among the animals, [man] is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter.' This, in fact, was a fundamental sign of his sanity.

The Canadian scholar, George Purnell, in the *Chesterton Review* (Fall-Winter 1975-76), identifies nine categories of humour in Chesterton, ranging from his use of illustration and analogy to verbal humour, nonsense and satire. He notes that Chesterton's work is packed with satire, and he quotes from one of his early essays, "A Defence of Publicity," which has a remarkably contemporary ring to it - given our obsession with privacy and the banishing of religious expressions from our public culture. Chesterton wrote in *The Defendant* (1901):

> The mere grammatical meaning of the word 'martyr' breaks into pieces at a blow the whole notion of the privacy of goodness. The Christian martyrdoms were more than demonstrations: they were advertisements. In our day the new theory of spiritual delicacy would desire to alter all this. It would permit Christ to be crucified if it was necessary to His Divine nature, but it would ask in the name of good taste why He could not be crucified in a private room. It would declare that the act of a martyr in being torn in pieces by lions was vulgar and sensational, though, of course, it would have no objection to being torn in pieces by a lion in one's own parlour before a circle of really intimate friends.

George Purnell emphasizes that Chesterton had an artist's eye, and was 'an artist with words [who] loved both the sounds and meanings of them'. As a practising journalist, he had, of course, to generate interest among his readers, to be controversial and, in a sense, entertaining. Humour was, therefore, a basic part of his repertoire. This has led, unfortunately, to his being often misunderstood and undervalued, particularly in university circles where there is, perhaps, a stronger tendency to self–seriousness than in certain other environments – a proneness to mistake humour and fun for a lack of intellectual seriousness. Yet Chesterton himself pointed out, in an essay on what he termed 'divine frivolity', that the two qualities of fun and seriousness are not related. Funny, he argued, is not the opposite of seriousness. Funny is the opposite of not funny. When he was chastised by a critic of the time, Joseph McCabe, for being frivolous, he answered that he did not 'import frivolity into a discussion of the nature of man,' because 'frivolity is a part of the nature of man.' 'Unless a man is in part a humourist,' said Chesterton, 'he is only in part a man'.

Can we make jokes about serious matters, such as religion and the ultimate importance of human life and the fate of human beings? Chesterton thought we could not make jokes about anything else. Unless life and its fundamental realities (such as love and pain and death) are serious, we cannot make jokes about them. Only because they ***are*** serious can we makes jokes about them. They have to be serious in the first place, or they don't matter enough to joke about them.

A joke, Chesterton said in *Heretics* (1905), is 'exceedingly useful', because 'it may contain the whole earthly sense, not to mention the whole heavenly sense, of a situation'. He pointed out how the Book of Job – Chesterton's favourite book of the Old Testament – combines seriousness and joking in happy combination. In *All Things Considered*, he famously proposed that it was the test of a good religion

whether you can joke about it; but he realised that this could easily be mistaken for a mocking of religious faith. Yet, far from disobeying the commandment, 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,' Chesterton thought that a religious joke could be a glorious affirmation of God's existence and nature. As he recalled:

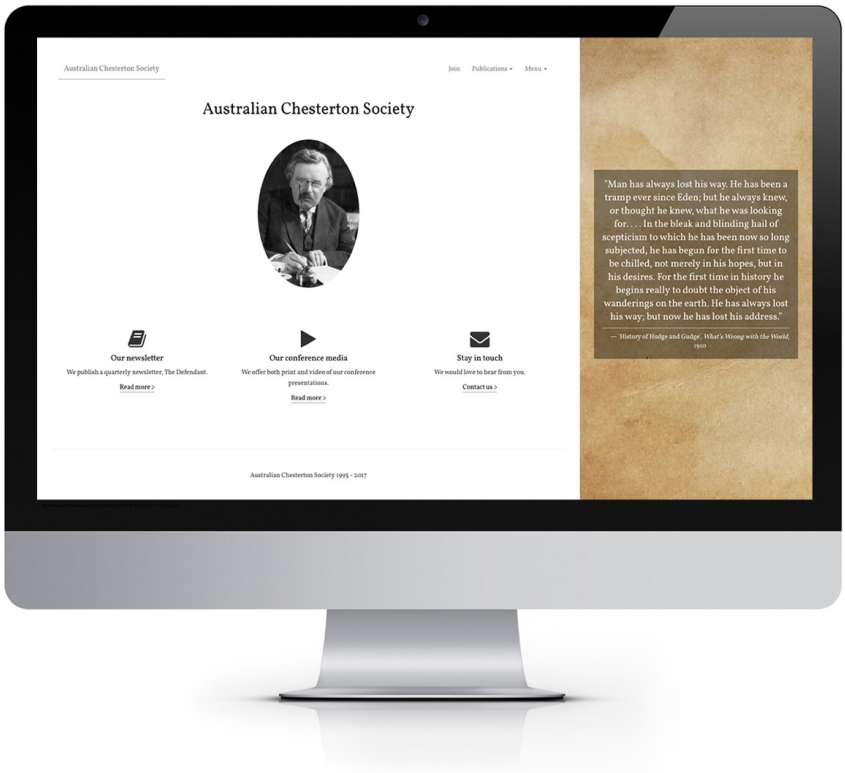
> In the same book in which God's name is God winking. fenced from being taken in vain, God himself overwhelms Job with a torrent of terrible levities. [The Book of Job] talks easily and carelessly about God laughing and

What Chesterton would have made of today's cultural and political climate, which is lacking singularly in any sense of humour, we can only surmise. Except for the lingering humour of our cartoonists and the odd satirist, we seem to inhabit an age that has become suffocatingly serious – with little capacity to laugh at its own pretentious obsessions. Chesterton might have commented that our loss of humour is the price of a new seriousness – in which case, my advice can only be to read more Chesterton, as this will dispel that fundamental misunderstanding!

In so many ways, Chesterton clarified truth through humour. He dissipated confusion of thought in a riotous way, and he dispensed good will. By no means the least of his insights, and his instruments, was his humour.

Website of the Australian Chesterton Society

All of the conference papers were video-recorded – by Michael Mendieta – and will be available on YouTube as well as on the Australian Chesterton website (http://chestertonaustralia.com/media.php), where the papers of previous conferences are also available, both in in video and text form.



Christian Humour through the Ages: from Plato to Cervantes

Stephen McInerney

In one of those statements of Chesterton's that sound so over the top we can only assume it to be true, the great generalist claims that "The history of humour is simply the history of literature", which is another way of saying (contrary to Tolstoy, who said "the happy man has no history") that the history of humour is simply the history of western man, since all of Chesterton's examples are from European authors.

In the essay on humour from which the above line is taken – it first appeared as Chesterton's entry on humour in the 1929 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* - he defines humour as "the sane sense of the incongruous", which he calls "one of the highest qualities balancing the European spirit", and he illustrates his thesis with examples from Homer, Chaucer, Cervantes and Dickens, among others.

In this paper I want to take Chesterton's thesis as read and explore how humour balances the European literary spirit, starting with Socrates and considering in turn the Bible, Dante, Chaucer and Cervantes, reflecting along the way on some apparently tangential issues, including Divine impassibility and the *communicatio idiomatum* (the communication of idioms in Christological language), in an attempt to discern the purposes of humour, both for literature and for the good life itself.

Socrates actually poses a challenge to Chesterton's view of humour just as he poses the most serious challenge thus far – centuries in advance of the fact – to Chesterton's view of the value of fairytales, poetry and myths. His attitude to humour precisely reflects and flows from his attitude to poetry and myth. Although Socrates acknowledges in the *Laws* that education begins with the muses – that is, with music, myth, poetry and song – and with gymnastics, which must precede any higher liberal arts and sciences, he notoriously banishes the poets from his ideal republic, no doubt in a moment of deliberate exaggeration to convince dullards of a truth we might otherwise miss: that the power of literature is real and is not to be trifled with. Socrates loves the poetry of Homer, knows much of it by heart and delights in quoting it throughout *The Republic,* so much so that he fears that Homer's influence over his feelings will overwhelm his reason. His rejection of the poets reveals his profound attraction to the very thing he claims to reject. In Shakespeare's saying, he doth protest too much. Socrates acknowledges as much when he compares his passion for poetry to that of a lover who has fallen for someone he believes will ultimately harm him. In such a scenario, he says, the wise man tears himself away from his lover, and so it is that a young man seeking wisdom must tear himself away from all poets except those who compose hymns to the gods and the praises of noble men.
One of his main objections to poetry is that it frequently represents supposedly noble characters and gods doing very ignoble things. Achilles tears his hair out, pours ashes on his head and walks sulking along the beach instead of carrying out his duty as a warrior. Zeus gives into his lustful desires for his sister-wife Hera and consequently loses control for a time over the events of the Trojan war, and supposedly reputable people elsewhere in the Greek canon are depicted "overcome with laughter". The only thing worse than seeing noble men overcome with laughter is seeing the gods themselves overcome with laughter, a phenomenon not unknown even in tragic poems like *The Iliad* where the cripple-footed artificer god, Hephaestus, laments being made a figure of fun after being hauled off Mount Olympus to the drunken amusement of his fellow deities.

For Socrates, laughter is nevertheless an important psychological tool, if properly used. When we hear in *The Iliad* the account of Zeus lamenting the fate of Hector, or crying over the prospect of his own mortal son Sarpedon dying, the appropriate response is laughter not tears. God does not suffer the pangs of human emotions and so, for Socrates, the idea that God grieves ought to strike the ordered soul as ridiculous: it should be a cause of mirth instead of grief. If, instead of weeping with Zeus, we laugh at the very idea of his weeping, such laughter would represent the triumph of our reason over our emotions and indicate that we have a rational view of the divine nature.

It might seem then that Socrates and Chesterton meet after all, because for Chesterton humor is simply a sane sense of the incongruous – and what could be more incongruous than seeing the divine nature compromised by human feelings and passions? When Socrates rejects the idea of passions within the divine nature itself, he correctly anticipates the Fathers' and St Thomas's doctrine of divine impassibility. And yet… did not a God weep with Martha and Mary over the death of

his friend Lazarus? And worse – did not a God die on the Cross? St Paul says that preaching Christ crucified is not only a scandal to the Jews but also *foolishness* to the Greeks. Socrates' laughter at such folly could be heard centuries before the event; but he would, I think, have delighted to discover centuries after his own death that he had been both right and wrong about God (right when it comes to divine impassibility, and wrong in his belief that a God could not weep), and had a healthy laugh at himself in the process, at how little even he – the wisest of Greeks – knew about God.

According to St Thomas, the *communicatio idiomatum* made possible by the Incarnation of the Divine *logos* means that whatever we say of Christ we can justly say of God, in the context of Christology anyway – and so we can speak of God's blood and God's mother without doing violence to the truth that God is pure spirit, and we can correctly say that God was born, wept, suffered and died. "What a thing were it then to see God die", John Donne wonders – and, we might add, what a thing *to say* that God died. But can we say that the Divine *Logos* laughed? St John Chrysostom doubted it, but Mel Gibson, in one of the more touching interludes in his movie masterpiece *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), depicts Our Lord sharing a joke with Our Lady when he splashes her with water after a day of carpentry. The scriptures, though, are silent on the matter.

In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose,* the monk Jorge, who disputes the question with William of Baskerville, argues that laughter is sinful and calls attention to the fact that Our Lord is never depicted laughing in the New Testament. William, countering this argument, suggests that the Scriptures' silence on the question cannot be taken as proof that Our Lord did not laugh. He asserts, moreover, that laughter is consistent with our reason, and since our reason comes from God, laughter is consistent with the will of God when it reflects our reason, for when "the false authority of an absurd proposition … offends reason, laughter can sometimes also be a suitable instrument" – an idea which, as we've seen, is already present in Plato's *Republic*.

While the New Testament is silent on whether or not Our Lord laughed, the Old Testament is full of references to laugher. King David recalls the time when his people's mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with joy. The suffering Job prays that God will fill his mouth with laughter, while Proverbs asserts more circumspectly that: "Even in laughter the heart may ache".

In the Christian era, St Benedict in his Rule cautions his monks against foolish words that lead to immoderate laughter (his words against foolishness echoing Socrates' fear), yet Chesterton argues that humour is the great antidote to pride, and I suspect St Benedict would agree with this assessment.

Medieval Christian civilization, according to Chesterton, had a strong sense of the humorously grotesque. He does not mention Dante in this connection but Dante certainly saw the funny side of the grotesque, as well as the moral side. As the pilgrim Dante's moral vision is gradually adjusted and purified by his experiences in

Inferno, his responses to the sinners he encounters there radically shift. Whereas early in the work he weeps in the second circle of hell over Paulo and Francesca – those adulterous lovers whose story causes him to faint – later he takes a real delight in literally kicking heads and verbally abusing the damned. One of the funniest moments in Inferno occurs in close proximity to the very nadir of hell, in the midst of heart-wrenching sorrow. In Canto 33 we hear the tale of Archbishop Ruggieri and Count Ugolini – how Ruggieri imprisoned his former partner in treachery and starved him to death along with his own sons; traitor turning on traitor. The canto begins with the grotesquely comical sight of Ugolino – who, Dante hints, may have eaten his own children to ward off starvation – feeding on the skull of his jailer, on the brains of the man who had deprived him of liberty, food, and life, in a supreme example of comic revenge. The feeding Ugolino then looks up from his grim repast, mouth bloodied with gore, to talk to Dante, to whom he unfolds his grisly tale. The further into hell we descend, the more we are supposed to laugh at these sinners rather than pity them, for as the psalmist says, the Lord Himself laughs at the wicked. And as Virgil says to Dante elsewhere in the poem, such reactions are both good and proper. Like Virgil, Socrates would have approved of Dante's response, as he would of the sight of the worst of sinners – Brutus the betrayer of Caesar, Judas the betrayer of Christ, and the High-Priest Caiphas, representing the crucifiers of Christ – with their heads stuck in the anus of Satan, legs kicking furiously like hanged men, in the cold bottom of Hell.

But Dante doesn't reserve his laughter for hardened sinners. He also laughs at himself through Beatrice, his guide through Paradiso. In the last stages of Purgatorio, where the two meet, Beatrice's tone with Dante is severe as she rebukes him for having followed images of failing, earthly goods. In Paradiso, by contrast, her tone is more playful and mocking. She laughs at him in Canto 2, calling him a baby for his incomprehension, which is both mockery and compliment, illustrating that Dante has become as a little child in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And when she is eclipsed by the Sun – where reside the souls of the wise – she smiles at the justness of her eclipse. As the Kirkpatrick translation presents it: "brightness from the laughter in her eyes/shared out to many thing [the] one whole mind" of the pilgrim-poet.

I realize I have shifted slightly from humour to laughter here, but laughter is an effect of humour, and clearly for Dante heaven induces a joy that comprehends humour, and therefore laughter. How does it differ from the laughter the reader experiences in Inferno? To use a colloquialism, it is the difference that spans the poles between laughing at someone, where the person being laughed at doesn't see the funny side, and laughing with someone, even apparently at their expense, as when Beatrice playfully mocks the poet for his incomprehension.

One of the other great medieval poets – and the greatest of the English medieval poets – Geoffrey Chaucer, follows Dante's example in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chesterton says of Chaucer that he was a humorist who understood "the quality of grandeur in a joke… whose broad outlook embraced the world as a whole, and saw even great humanity against a background of greater things".

I have mentioned that Dante uses his own work of genius, the *Commedia*, to put himself down by laughing at himself through his characters. Chaucer follows suit. As Chesterton describes it, on the course of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the poet himself as a pilgrim is asked to contribute his tale to the series that includes the famous tales of the Miller, the Prioress, the Wife of Bath, and the Knight – but the tale Chaucer the character tells in his own poem is so bad that the innkeeper shuts him down. The joke is the same as Dante's essentially. Like Dante, Chaucer has created the world of the poem – all of it springs from his imagination; even the character of the innkeeper who silences him is Chaucer's creation, just as Beatrice the guide is Dante's. The pride of genius is here kept in check by – and held in tension with – Christian humility.

As Chesterton says, "Chaucer is mocking not merely bad poets but good poets; the best that he knows", for what is a mortal poet compared to the Divine poet? What is man compared to God? How can we take ourselves so seriously? And yet we must, because – to adjust a famous dictum of Robert Frost's – life is played for *im*-mortal stakes. Eternity is on the line, and as Chesterton says elsewhere, humour is allied with gravity: "In order to enjoy the lightest and most flying joke a man must be rooted in some basic sense of the good things; and the good of things means, of course, the seriousness of things".

There is no better example of this than Chaucer's notorious Pardoner whom we first meet in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. He, accompanied by the Summoner, is the last of the pilgrims mentioned. He is a detestable and detested figure, a social as well as a moral outcast and reprobate; a hypocrite; a lecherous fiend; also, perhaps paradoxically, a kind of eunuch; sexually abnormal; a charlatan; a seller of indulgences; a fabricator of relics; a drunkard; physically ugly and effeminate. Yet his Tale is one of the most morally piercing and socially acute of all the pilgrims' – the most honest, in a way, holding nothing back, and therefore the most unsettling.

The most moral of lessons comes from the most immoral of men, called by G.L Kittredge, "the most abandoned character" (*Chaucer and his Poetry*, 210) and by G.H. Gerould, "the most sinister yet morally convincing figure in all literature" (*Chaucerian Essays*, 60). As Derek Traversi writes: "If there is a sense in which the conception of damnation has a place in Chaucer's scheme… it is in these tales that we shall find it exemplified". (*The Canterbury Tales: A Reading*, 161).

The Pardoner, then, for all his humour –and his tone is undoubtedly humorous throughout – has a serious undercurrent: a man who has despaired of his own salvation, who is steeped in corruption, who is able nonetheless to identify the reasons for his sin and those of mankind generally. Able to inspire others to repentance, albeit by dubious means, he feels himself – although this is only subtly hinted at – cut off from God's mercy.

The Pardoner emerges to tell his tale in the wake of a tale of grief and sorry. The Host expresses his grief over the details of the Physician's tale about the death of a girl, the virtuous Virginia, and requests the Pardoner to tell a tale of mirth "or japes right anoon", to relieve the anguished atmosphere, which indeed he does, but it is far more troubling in its own way than the sad tale the physician has just told – meaning that, in carrying out the Host's request, the Pardoner is nonetheless not carrying it out to the end the Host desires: namely, to be relieved of his anguish over the fate of the girl in the physician's tale.

Although the Pardoner is more than willing to let fly with some japes and mirth – as evidenced by his punning on the name of St Ronian (ronnions are testicles, according to the editors of the *Norton Anthology*) the other pilgrims will not have it. Their request is also, then, a rebuke: "Nay, lat him telle us of no ribaudye". The pilgrims get the joke, the play on a saint's name and the colloquial word for testicles, but they don't appreciate it. They have the pardoner's number. Perhaps sensing that they are cleverer than his average gullible audience, the Pardoner takes the approach of bringing them in on his secrets, telling them how he rips off less discerning folk with his fake relics and worthless pardons, all of which come at a price. "My theme is always oon, and evere was: / *Radix malorum est cupiditas."*

The line could not be more pointedly ironic, nor delivered with more cynicism - the Pardoner preaches on the theme that the root of all evil is the greed for gain, precisely in order to satisfy his own greed for gain. And he offers various remedies for sin, even though conversion of souls is "not [his] principle intent".

He does not claim that his relics – a piece of old cloth which he calls a sail from St Peter's ship, an old pillow case which he calls Our Lady's veil, or the bone of a Holy Jew's sheep – can cure the soul, but they can help the body and one's purse. They can multiply livestock and grain, mimicking the magic of the usurer, and although they won't stop your wife committing adultery with the local parish priest, they will help you (if you mix some fragments into water and drink the draught) not to care about her adultery, which, according to the Pardoner, is as good as getting her to stop committing adultery. Knowing, though, that there are many people who won't be taken in by such promised miracles, the Pardoner has another way of ensuring they step forth to pour out their hard-earned monies. He says that those guilty of two specific sins must not come forth to venerate his relics. What are these sins? In the case of a man, it is a "sinne horrible, that he / Dat nat for shame of it yshriven be". In the case of a woman, the sin is making of your husband a cuckold. Naturally, since none of the pardoner's flock wish to be identified with sodomy or adultery, everyone steps forward to venerate the relics and pays his or her fee to the pardoner. In this way the Pardoner makes his living. Since the root of all evil is cupidity, what better way to save people from hell than to relieve them of their material goods! The pardoner prefers riches in this world to those in the next, but he sees himself doing a service to those who have the opposite priorities. Everyone wins, except that the Pardoner is darkly aware that he is storing-up for himself treasure in this life at the expense of the next.

The joke doubles back on him then, as we see when he attempts to entice the pilgrims to venerate his relics or to pay them to absolve them of their sins without their needing to confess, having just told them that his relics are fake and his pardon dubious. The Host says the Pardoner would try to pass off his stained underwear as a relic and that he, the Host, would as soon cut off the Pardoner's testicles as kiss his fraudulent stained rags. The tables have turned: through the Host's reaction the pilgrims see the truth of the Pardoner, and the reader's laughter becomes the final judgement on this sad man. God doth indeed laugh at the wicked.

The moral importance we attach to the direction laughter takes in a text – towards a wicked character, who may or may not be aware of it; or towards a self-aware character, even the author himself, as an exercise of Christian humility – is complicated somewhat when we come to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Vladimir Nabokov developed such an attachment to the eponymous hero of Cervantes' masterpiece, that he famously rebuked the dead author for making such a noble figure the butt of everyone's jokes: these, he thought, deprived Don Quixote of his human dignity.

Certainly, unlike the pilgrims Dante and Chaucer, who saw the comical side of their serious endeavor, the life of a Knight errant attempting to restore the Age of Gold in the Age of Iron is a matter of such seriousness that it admits of no comical self-awareness; in fact, the humour of the novel depends on the idea that the hero does not get the joke, and does not realize that he is the cause of our mirth. Those windmills at which he tilts really are giants; the prostitutes really are fair virgins in the eyes of the Knight, and the debauched inn really is an enchanted castle. Don Quixote does not have a sane sense of the incongruous; he simply sees what the rest of us fail to see: an enchanted world.

The glory that hath passed away from the earth by the time Wordsworth recalls the fact in his "Immortality Ode", is still real for Don Quixote, though not for his contemporaries. We laugh at the incongruity between Don Quixote's view of the world and reality, but Don Quixote doesn't get the joke. Does it follow then that he is not rooted in a basic sense of the goodness of things, the seriousness of things, as Chesterton identified the necessary condition for humour. I don't think so. I prefer to think that he embodies the beatitude, like the weeping knight in whose lament he joins: "Blessed are ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh." Don Quixote's laughter is reserved for heaven; Cervantes gives us the gift of laughter by giving his hero the gift of tears – both are sacred, and really two aspects of the one blessed reality. The restraint of his hero is the restraint of the original holy fool, and the model for all others, Our Lord, who, as Chesterton writes in the conclusion of *Orthodoxy*:

> Restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all me when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us

when He walked upon our earth: and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.

_____

Dr Stephen McInerney is a Senior Lecturer in Literature and formerly Associate Dean of Studies at Campion College in Sydney. He is currently on leave from the College serving as Executive Officer (Academic) at the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation in Sydney. He holds a Doctorate from the University of Sydney (2006), and a Bachelor of Arts (with First Class Honours) from the Australian National University, where he was awarded the University Medal in English in 1999. His doctoral dissertation, *The Enclosure of An Open Mystery: Sacrament and Incarnation in the Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones and Les Murray*, was published in 2012. In the same year he completed an Advanced Diploma in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Cambridge, and was awarded the Theological Studies Prize. A published poet, his first volume of poetry was recommended in the Times Literary Supplement Books of the Year in 2002. His latest volume, *The Wind Outside,* was published in 2016.

MYSTICAL MERRIMENT: SOME CRUMBS TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF COMEDY

Gary Furnell

I begin with an observation by Auguste Renoir, the French painter:

> I am well aware that it is difficult to accept that a painter can produce truly great works and remain happy. Simply because Fragonard enjoyed a laugh, he came to be considered as a minor painter. People given to laughter are never taken seriously. Art in a frock coat, whether in painting, music, or literature, will always carry the day.

In part what I want to do in this paper is to explore why solemn art, art in a frock-coat, rules the day, and I also want to explore why it shouldn't have such exclusive prominence. As I proceed I want to build a sort of theology of comedy, hence the subtitle of my paper: *Some Crumbs Towards a Theology of Comedy.*

In his essay 'A Defense of Farce', in *The Defendant* (1901), Chesterton said that any discussion of comedy and laughter is self-defeating if it adopts a serious, po-faced attitude. He wanted, for consistency's sake, that the examination of humour and

laughter itself be comedic. So he has set me - and all the presenters - the tone for this conference, and it should not be solemn.

It is very Chestertonian to be light of heart but with the mind grounded in reason and dogma, so I'll begin, as I believe Chesterton would have me begin, with articulating the foundational dogma for all that follows.

If the first essential truth of Buddhism is true: *To live is to suffer*, then there is perhaps no great scope for a theology of comedy. But if the first essential truth of Judeo-Christianity is true: *In the beginning God made heaven and earth and behold it was very good,* then there is much more scope for a theology of comedy because all that is, is an expression of purposeful love.

Man's good dispositions and instincts, including the instinct for comedy and laughter, are aspects of his given nature and are not absurd nor merely a utilitarian means of coping with difficulties, but *meant to be*. And their purpose is simply to allow man to enjoy, and to develop in enjoyment, the things that are given to him.

As Sir Roger Scruton notes in his *On Human Nature* (2017)*,* laughter is something uniquely human. 'No other animal laughs.' In addition, Scruton notes that Darwinian attempts to explain laughter along naturalistic lines have all proved inadequate. Another truth of Judeo-Christianity is that man and nature are fallen, they are not in this present age what they are intended to be. The fall into abnormality has affected every part of man's nature; including how we view the world and what we find funny.

Comedy is creative and complex; the more creative the comedy, the more it delights us. Likewise, the more complex the comedy, the more it is funny at a number of levels at once - the more we delight in it. In the same way, comedy is best enjoyed in company, and *through* company. We like to participate with one another in comedy; for example, by being left to make the link in our imagination between the joke's preamble and its punchline. Again, as Scruton observed, 'Laughter seems to have a beneficial effect on human communities because those who laugh together also grow together and win through their laughter a mutual toleration of their all-too-human defects.'

These aspects of comedy reflect the creativity and the complexity of the created world. They also reflect - in man's nature - the image of the divine nature which, although degraded by the Fall, still defines man. We all experience sorrow and pain and death, but these do not ultimately define humanity. It is joy, wonder, community and thankfulness that are man's best and native territory.

Chesterton, whose thinking informed much of what I've just said and much of what follows, lamented that many people, especially creative people, saw comedy as frivolous compared to sombre, serious works. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, for example, had a gravity that properly depressed people, but the Marx Brothers only

made people laugh. In ‘A Defence of Farce’, Chesterton thought this sort of emphasis was wholly misplaced.

> Nothing in this strange age of transition is so depressing as its merriment. All the most brilliant men of the day when they set about the writing of comic literature do it under the one destructive fallacy and disadvantage: the notion that comic literature is in some sort of way superficial.

Not only is comic literature *not* superficial, but writing it really well and inventively is much harder work than writing ‘serious’ literature. It takes more energy, creativity and rich imagination to be inventively funny than it does to be solemn and sad.

Unending seriousness is an unending surrender to entropy; it is the prone position of lassitude. Is there one serious writer who has the consistent zest and skillful facility with the English language as the comic writer P.G. Wodehouse? His prose, especially in the Jeeves and Bertie stories, makes the prose of many literary prize-winners seem fatigued.

The celebrated playwrights, novelists, film-makers, poets and artists who so relentlessly present to us their urgent and grave works depicting social problems, dysfunction, alienation, oppression and despair may be in fact displaying their low levels of energy and imagination. It takes real energy, real creativity, real skill and love for one's art to produce a really fresh and effective comedy; a person has to be fully alive to laugh with gusto.

Chesterton thought that joy was intended for mankind, so creative and artistic works that brought joy and laughter were not just a palliative, or a seasonal variation to a predominant severity and seriousness, but the best and truest expression of life. They were anything but superficial. The strange privilege of importance given to sombre art and grave works expresses an emotional attitude that is characteristic of modern culture; its underlying nihilism has twisted its perspective so that innocent laughter is suspect and a sense of jocularity is seen as inadequate. The morose disposition of the age's prevailing emotions is therefore on display, as Chesterton points out in ‘A Defence of Farce’:

> ... I myself have little doubt that it is due to the astonishing and ludicrous lack of belief in hope and hilarity which marks modern aesthetics, to such an extent that it has spread even to the revolutionists (once the hopeful section of men), so that even those who ask us to fling the stars into the sea are not quite sure that they will be any better there than they were before.

Chesterton went on to say that this was an expression, not of man's maturity, but of his immaturity; in the same way that teenagers are easily depressed and readily attracted by the macabre, so modern secular man is especially focused on the bleak and the dysfunctional. Contemporary culture doesn't value farce and pantomime, to take two examples of joyful, possibility-fueled art, because the emotions they

expressed were increasingly alien to contemporary people. In Chesterton's words in 'A Defence of Farce':

> The artistic justification, then, of farce and pantomime must consist in the emotions of life which correspond to them. And these emotions are to an incredible extent crushed out by the modern insistence on the painful side of life only. Pain, it is said, is the dominant element of life; but this is true only in a very special sense. If pain were for one single instant literally the dominant element if life, every man would be found hanging dead from his own bed-post by the morning. Pain, as the black and catastrophic thing, attracts the youthful artist, just as a schoolboy draws devils and skeletons and men hanging. But joy is a far more elusive and elvish matter, since it is our reason for existing, and a very feminine reason; it mingles with every breath we draw and every cup of tea we drink. The literature of joy is infinitely much more difficult, more rare and more triumphant than the black and white literature of pain.

So even these most knockabout forms of humour had their defender in Chesterton. We may say that a delight in laughter, a great sense of comedy, are a mark of a really mature and balanced person.

Chesterton thought another reason for pantomime and farce being so little esteemed was because a sense of fantastical possibilities among the commonplaces of life does not currently enjoy intellectual credibility. Deterministic biological and/or social conditions are seen as so constraining that Jesus' statement that with God all things are possible, is regarded as the outmoded faith of a bygone age. We, being so clever, cannot in all seriousness entertain those hopes for our world or ourselves anymore, so the art-forms that embody a free and playful possibility are thought to be of little worth. But this is an arbitrary truncation of human imagination, and we are the poorer without the expression of this freedom-based form of comedy. Here is Chesterton again in 'A Defence of Farce':

> To the quietest human being, seated in the quietest house, there will sometimes come a sudden and unmeaning hunger for the possibilities or impossibilities of things; he will abruptly wonder whether the teapot may not suddenly begin to pour out honey or sea-water, the clock to point to all hours of the day at once, the candle to burn green or crimson, the door to open upon a lake or a potato field instead of a London street. Upon anyone who feels this nameless anarchism there rests for the time being the abiding spirit of pantomime.

Of course, farce and pantomime are ridiculous. Of course, they're mad. But that's only because man is himself more than a bit ridiculous and more than a little mad, and it is part of our humanity to want to explore the potential freakishness of nature, because both man and nature are freaks.

Chesterton knew that comedy and humour are evidence of life. In fact, he thought comedy and humour such important evidences of life that we could even judge a thing as big as a religion by how much it lent itself to humour. Yet people pride themselves on being serious.

In his book *Orthodoxy* (1908), he said:

> Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. One "settles down" into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to a gay self-forgetfulness. A man "falls" into a brown study; he reaches up at a blue sky. Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be a heresy, but a much more sensible heresy, to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good TIMES leading article than a good joke in PUNCH. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity.

I would also add that a great comedian is a rarity in a way. The ability to imagine and produce original comedy is a gift, and like all very great gifts it is comparatively rare. Very few people have the comedic gift of P.G. Wodehouse, the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati, Woody Allen, Francis Veber, Clive James or Barry Humphries. Flannery O'Connor, a witty writer herself, observed that nature is not prodigal in producing geniuses, and that applies to comedy as much as to any other special gift. It comes from somewhere else and is given to the fortunate and usually hard-working person. I think Chesterton was particularly gifted in humour, although it's undoubtedly true that his spiritual perspective on life helped him to see, appreciate and express comedy.

And that leads me to suggest that stable convictions aid comedy; dogmas that highlight the virtues of decency, modesty and dignity do not hinder comedy, rather they permit it by providing a firm framework for fun. Once more, Roger Scruton makes the point that to laugh is to make some kind of judgement about something. Flannery O'Connor said that to see the world as a comedy you need to have firm convictions. She also said that two reasons modern writers have to struggle so hard to find humour is because, one, they're not sure man has a soul, and two, their convictions are always changing. This is her observation in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1957):

> Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama. The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan colleagues by recognizing sin as sin. According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment but as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future. Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe. One reason a great deal of our contemporary fiction is humourless is because so many of these writers are

> relativists and have to be continuously justifying the actions of their characters on a sliding scale of values.

I want to develop the idea that convictions aid comedy – and in particular the convictions of decency and modesty – by looking at the comedy of Nina Conti, an English ventriloquist, the great novelist Jane Austen, and the Australian Kransky Sisters, a musical trio.

It is certainly possible for a comedienne to be contemporary, very funny, and insist on correct behaviour. It is, in fact, one of the best ways for women, in particular, to be witty. As Chesterton wrote in *What's Wrong with the World* (1910):

> Women generally have the strong sense that if they don't insist on correct behaviour no one will. Babies are not strong on points of dignity, and grown men are quite unpresentable.

He also said this:

> For the two things that a healthy person hates most between heaven and hell are a woman who is not dignified and a man who is.

In other words, decorum and decency, at an intuitive and deeply spiritual level, are especially important to women and properly valued by the most sensible of women. And it is at this point that so many contemporary comediennes sell themselves short, while others succeed so well.

The foul-mouthed delivery of a post-modern comic telling the audience about her sexually-transmitted disease caught after a one-night stand with her best-friend's ex-fiancée is destroying her own dignity and decorum in her search for laughter and is contributing to the furtherance of bad form. All of which is at odds with women's innate and great good sense that firm decorum is necessary to ensure a tolerable sociality. If everyone were rude and impolite, then society wouldn't be worth living in; generally, women understand this better than men.

Nina Conti uses ventriloquism to achieve the complex combination of decency, decorum and hilarity. One of her dummies, a little primate with an Anglo-Indian accent, called Monk, says cheeky and insulting things while Nina attempts to control his witticisms and direct him towards kindness and prudence. By design, she fails, yet she tries, and so Conti is funny without violating common community standards or her own dignity. Instead, she seeks to uphold them and the contrast she provides to Monk is the source of much of the humour. Her inventive comedy is a success without needing to rely on the thin cliché of a success through scandal.

Nina Conti is following a tradition of women's wit that has Jane Austen as one of its notable exemplars. In all her novels Jane Austen demonstrated that she had a keen understanding of the potential for humour if indecency sat next to decorum. The crass behaviour of Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* gains in dramatic and comedic

value because Lydia's indifference to decorum is juxtaposed with the steady modesty of her sisters, Jane and Elizabeth. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is funny because she assumes the status of aristocracy graces her with dignity, but this is subverted by her pride and meddling arrogance, and the common sense of Jane Bennet provides the necessary contrast.

The possibilities for a loss of decorum are as varied as the circumstances, and therefore the possibilities for comedy are equally rich *as long as the manners are non-negotiable and commonly understood*. Comedy begins when characters lose moral balance and allow vanity, hedonism, or status to eclipse decorum. It's in the nature of the case that we don't laugh with them, we laugh at them.

But if all the Bennet family and the rest of their society were as delinquent as Lydia about decorum then the opportunities for - and the sharpness of the comedy - is greatly reduced. This seems to be our situation today. It's the reason why the *Bridget Jones* books and films, for example, have to work so much harder for their effects; the comedy is clunky and heavy-handed compared to Jane Austen's because modern Western society is relatively indifferent to firm manners. Bridget Jones isn't the exception in her society; her indiscretions and dysfunctions are the rule; they are common, not uncommon. Where is the contrast when everyone is equally crass? Folly and indecency can't readily sit next to decorum if decorum is constantly being shoved into a tiny corner. It will be no surprise if comics leave less and less unsaid and undisclosed in the search for elusive laughter which must be hounded out of a diminishing reserve of dignity and modesty.

Modesty in sexual matters is another part of the firm framework of conviction which provides opportunities for comedy. Comics, including female comics, who accept this framework and then play against it have another rich field for comedy compared to their colleagues who don't recognize the framework, or who obliterate it and thus lose the opportunity for humour born of contrast.

The comedy of the Kranksy Sisters is founded in large measure on their sexual modesty, expressed in their anachronistically-styled clothes: long-sleeved white blouses buttoned up to the throat and ankle-length black shapeless skirts leave little flesh to be seen other than pale hands and pale faces. It's as if a scion of the Addams Family had been hibernating since the 1950s in the rural Queensland town of Esk – where the Kransky's were raised – and then woke decades later to bring their peculiar music and odd family history to audiences around the world.

Their insistence on an almost obsessive modesty allows the Kransky Sisters to hint at some rather small improprieties by other members of their extended step-family and make them hilarious. Their modesty does not limit comedy; it creates it by providing something firm to measure aberration against. They don't mention their periods, their one-night stands, or their nipple-piercing experiences because all this is foreign to them, and not one swear word passes their lips as they unfold their odd family history and sing their songs. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the Kransky's swearing or indulging in any grossness at all. It would be badly out of character.

Even when they sing Marvin Gaye's *Sexual Healing* or the 1976 hit *Afternoon Delight* the performance gains in strange appeal because they appear to be oblivious to the sensuality of the lyrics. What they sing is weirdly at odds with how they look and behave. We relish the incongruity.

Besides modesty and decorum, another conviction or dogma that provides for comedy is human dignity. The highest view of mankind – that each one of us is made in the image of God and is akin in some ways with divinity – is a conviction that gives comedy a special edge.

It is because we are dignified creatures that good slapstick is so funny. Charlie Chaplin knew this and so he dressed his hobo character in a bowler hat, a formal suit and gave him a walking cane: the hobo insists on his dignity, and when he suffers or causes indignities the contrast makes it funny. It wouldn't be funny if there were no clear difference between dignity and indignity. Chesterton said that man's comedy is born of his immense dignity and the fact that anything in reality, however humble – like a banana skin or a gust of wind – could trip him up or have him in a tangle. This is in his essay 'On Running After One's Hat' (in *All Things Considered*)*:*

> There is an idea that it is humiliating to run after one's hat: and when people say it is humiliating they mean that it is comic. It certainly is comic: but man is a very comic creature, and most of the things he does are comic – eating, for instance. And the most comic things of all are exactly the things that are most worth doing – such as making love. A man running after a hat is not half as ridiculous as a man running after his wife.

Barbara Pym is an English author who was popular in the 1940s and 1950s, and then had a resurgence of popularity in the 1980s, winning the Booker Prize. A devout Anglican woman, Pym's novels are animated by the sense that people are wonders who are caught up in a tangle of trivialities and so we become ridiculous, yet despite this we try to live lives of dignity and achievement. Humanity's tangles wouldn't be so comic if our dignity wasn't so firm. It is a perspective borne from the Christian conception of man as a fallen lord, a dispossessed king. It is comedy that comes from an elevated *spiritual* conception of man which is in contrast to man's fallen condition. And when we measure ourselves in this way, we see our own ridiculousness.

When I, for example, wake up in the morning, bleary-eyed with my hair sticking up everywhere, I look ridiculous. When I see myself naked in a full-length mirror, I look ridiculous; and if I square my shoulders and suck in my gut and stand tall, then I still look ridiculous, but now I look ridiculous in a different way. Lots of my habits and routines, my fears and pretensions, my dreams and my daydreams are ridiculous; lots of the things I say and think and imagine are astonishingly ridiculous. But I'm not alone in this: the life of every human being is a work of sublime comedy. If you think this doesn't apply to you, just think of the intimacies of your bathroom and your bedroom; think of your daydreams, your pretensions and the conversations you have with yourself. This isn't morbid self-loathing; it's healthy self-laughing.

I balance this sense of my ridiculous self with my status as an exalted self, made to share in the divine nature. This gift elevates *us*, which is very different from us elevating ourselves. Pascal says that the Christian is in the unique position of being able to humble himself without despair, and exalt himself without pride.

Chesterton said that, 'A thing called good spirits is possible only to the spiritual.' Shakespeare's play *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream* was dear to Chesterton because it portrayed the spiritual as comic, and even as frivolous. Chesterton thought *Macbeth* was probably Shakespeare's greatest play because it's a powerful portrayal of human liberty and its consequences for good or evil. We have the ability to be a blessing or a curse, with these august choices taking place in a moral universe which will not be cheated or tricked.

But the play Chesterton *enjoyed* was *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, a fantasy of gods and lovers and common rustics. He enjoyed it because it was the genius of Shakespeare to perceive and portray the *joy* of spiritual things; the *fun* of the divine things. This isn't common: think of all the portrayals of the supernatural in books and movies and on television; the spirits are nearly always malignant. In my years as a public librarian I noticed how immensely popular are the gothic horror books of Stephen King and Dean Koontz, the many vampire books of Anne Rice, Stephanie Meyer and Charlaine Harris, and the zombie movies and television series, such as the *Walking Dead*. In all of them, the supernatural is seen as a threat to humanity, dangerous and destructive more often than not. The Harry Potter books are somewhat unusual because in them the supernatural is both good and bad, but broadly speaking, the mystical is mostly perceived as malicious. Chesterton blamed the truncated view of the Puritans for this imbalance, which continues to today. In 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (in *The Common Man*), He said:

> Puritanism…cast away the generous and wholesome superstition, it approved only of the morbid and the dangerous. In their treatment of the great national fairy-tale of good and evil, the Puritans killed St George but kept the dragon. And this seventeenth century tradition of dealing with the psychic life lies like a great shadow over England and America, so that if we glance at a novel about occultism we may be perfectly certain that it deals with sad or evil destiny.

But not in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here is what Chesterton says:

> The sentiment of such a play, so far as it can be summed up at all, can be summed up in one sentence. It is the mysticism of happiness. That is to say, it is the conception that as a man lives upon a borderland he may find himself in the spiritual or supernatural atmosphere, not only though being profoundly sad or meditative, but by being extravagantly happy. The soul might be rapt out of the body in an agony of sorrow, or a trance of ecstasy; but it might also be rapt out of the body in a paroxysm of laughter. Sorrow we know can go beyond itself; so, according to Shakespeare, can pleasure go

> beyond itself and become something dangerous and unknown. And the reason that the logical and destructive modern school, of which Mr. Bernard Shaw is an example, does not grasp this purely exuberant nature of [Shakespeare's] comedies is simply that their logical and destructive attitude have rendered impossible the very experience of this preternatural exuberance.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read of the redeemed joining in *the joyful assembly of angels*. There, the mystical is merry; and that brings me to my final point: the search for the mystical can be comical; the search for meaning can be a source of mirth.

Flannery O'Connor never got to write it because she died quite young, but she thought that there was a richly comic novel to be written about a proud intellectual woman being drawn despite herself into the Christian faith. Think of the comic possibilities of someone like Hillary Clinton, for example, slowly becoming sure that her real vocation was to be a Pentecostal lady pastor, especially if it was in a small red-neck town full of her 'deplorables'. Imagine the comedy in prospect if German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance, found to her horror that God's spirit was leading her to become a cloistered nun, praying for the world rather than parading around the world.

Fortunately, there is one person on the planet telling these sorts of stories, and that is Woody Allen. He, almost alone, is a film director and screen writer who makes man's search for meaning, man's search for God, into a major theme in many of his movies. One film critic has called him the Albert Camus of cinema, and it's a valid description. The brilliance of Woody Allen is to see that man's search for meaning can also be funny.

It is in the first two collections of his *New Yorker* pieces that religious searching, questions about death and the afterlife, and a desire for certainty take centre stage with hilarious results.

In *Death Knocks*, a man's death tries to make a dramatic entrance by appearing through his apartment window, but in front of the man whose life he is supposed to take, he stumbles over the window-sill and falls on his face. Embarrassed and somewhat dazed, Death is duped by the man and sent packing. In *God: a play* two ancient Greeks are on stage, an actor and a playwright. They argue over the unsatisfactory end of the play – and of life - but finally decide to buy the latest gadget for every theatrical difficulty, the *Deus ex machina*, newly-invented by Westinghouse. They're told, 'Sophocles put a deposit on one. Euripides wants two.' But at a crucial moment, the machine malfunctions and kills Zeus; with God dead, the play and the audience descend into chaos. The production ends with the playwright unable to accept the absurdity of his creation. The merriment around the search for meaning continues throughout Allen's long movie career. From *Annie Hall* to *Hannah and Her Sisters, Crimes and Misdemeanors* through to *You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger* and *Magic in the Moonlight*, man's search for a stable moral basis

for life and knowledge of existence, if any, beyond death has given Allen's comedies a depth that is lacking in most of his fellow film-makers. It's one reason his films are so ardently loved by fans: comedy is multiplied by metaphysics.

I can't describe it as well as he has done it, so I'd like to share a number of short clips from his movies to show how man's spiritual search can be the inspiration for comedy. [These movie clips are available on the video version of this paper, on the Australian Chesterton Society website.] The first brief clip is from *Annie Hall* his 1975 Academy Award winner. In this scene, a boy who looks like a young Woody Allen, is taken by his mother to a doctor because the boy won't do his homework. It's got something to do with the universe. Notice too how times have changed: the doctor is smoking throughout the consultation.

The next clip is from Stardust *Memories* where Woody Allen plays a film-maker who is fed-up with the shenanigans of celebrity and wants some moral guidelines for his life. He meets some aliens, whose IQ is 1600, and gets their advice. I especially like that they tell him some home-truths about his less-than-functional girlfriend.

I'll let Chesterton conclude by reading his concluding paragraph from his essay 'A Defence of Baby Worship', in which the baby's physical ridiculousness together with their humility and dignity is linked to mystical comedy. Chesterton especially liked the bulbous heads of babies.

> But the humourous look of [babies] children is perhaps the most endearing of all the bonds that hold the Cosmos together. Their top-heavy dignity is more touching than any humility; their solemnity gives us more hope for all things than a thousand carnivals of optimism; their large and lustrous eyes seem to hold all the stars in their astonishment; their fascinating absence of nose seems to give us the most perfect hint of the humour that awaits us in the kingdom of heaven.

Gary Furnell is a public librarian and a frequent contributor to various literary and cultural journals. He is a regular writer for *Quadrant*, publishing essays on literature, philosophy and religion as well as short fiction, and for many years has been writing for *Studio* magazine, a Christian arts quarterly.

His current long-term project, nearly completed, is a thematic treatment of the Hebrew wisdom books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, with his own thoughts supplemented by the much deeper thoughts of Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French polymath; Edmund Burke, the 18th century English parliamentarian; Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher; and G K Chesterton.

Hilaire Belloc as a Comical Companion: Some Readings

John O'Halloran

I have been asked to speak today on Hilaire Belloc as Chesterton's "comical companion". The theme of our Conference is "Humour", and, although Belloc was often humorous, his humour, as we will see, is not always comical.

One of his friends in later life, JB (Johnny) Morton, referring to his essays, writes: "*erudition, buffoonery, poetry, scolding mockery are all jumbled up together, and sometimes the mood changes in the middle of a sentence. He rarely talked in the same strain for long, for however serious was his subject, his sense of humour was always on the watch, to pounce*"[1].

Morton was referring to Belloc's essays, but this is abundantly true of his other writings as well. Let me test this, and commence my readings, with this short poem, titled "*The Loser*":

He lost his money first of all
– And losing that is half the story –
And later on he tried a fall
With Fate, in things less transitory.

[1] JB Morton, *Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1955, p.114.

He lost his heart – and found it dead –
(His one and only true discovery),
And after that he lost his head,
And lost his chances of recovery.

He lost his honour bit by bit
Until the thing was out of question.
He worried so at losing it,
He lost his sleep and his digestion.

He lost his temper – and for good –
The remnants of his reputation,
His taste in wine, his choice of food,
And then, in rapid culmination,

His certitudes, his sense of truth,
His memory, his self-control,
The love that graced his early youth,
And lastly his immortal soul.[2]

We can probably agree that this is humorous, but I am not sure how many of us would find it comical. And if you were to look at any photograph of Belloc – whether taken in youth, middle age or in advanced years – you would be tempted to think that this was a man who never smiled or laughed in his life. However, Belloc lived his life with gusto, despite the fact that it was often touched by tragedy and loss, and in his voluminous writings his humour, as Morton says, is a constant presence.

And when I say voluminous, in the 46 years of Belloc's productive life (1896 to 1942), he wrote more than 150 works, mostly full-length books, in an astonishing variety of genres: essays, novels, travelogues, biography, politics, economics, satire, history, military tactics, children's verse, poetry and epigrams. When once asked why he wrote so prolifically, he replied: "*because my children are howling for pearls and caviar*"[3]. Financial necessity was indeed a major impetus, and a major anxiety, throughout the whole of his working life.

Belloc's early life

Belloc was born on 27 July 1870, four years before GK Chesterton, in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, now within the western suburbs of Paris, to a French father, the attorney Louis Belloc, and an English mother, Bessie Rayner Parkes. Belloc had an elder sister, Marie, born in 1868.

With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War a matter of days before Belloc was born, the family left in haste for England, and when, in 1872, Belloc's father suddenly died, the family's move to England became permanent.

---

[2] *Hilaire Belloc, Collected Verse*, Penguin Books, London, 1958 ("***Collected Verse***"), p.95.

[3] Quoted in Morton, *op. cit*., p.167.

After Belloc showed early promise as a student, Cardinal John Henry Newman accepted him into the Oratory School in Birmingham, where he distinguished himself in English and debating, as well as on the stage. But he was also, even at that age, a young man of action. He was an adventurous and indefatigable walker. At the age of 12, he made a five-day hike through the Sussex countryside, and took many other long walks.

In London, in 1890, he met and fell in love with an American visitor, Elodie Hogan. With characteristic decisiveness, he immediately resolved to follow her to the US, selling his book prizes to finance the passage, and making money for the train fares and accommodation across the continent to San Francisco by gambling (not very successfully) and selling his drawings. Arriving on Elodie's doorstep, he was sent packing by her mother. There was nothing for it but to make the long trek back home, the way he had come.

Belloc then decided on military service with the French army. He needed to do this to retain French citizenship and his right to return to the country of his birth, but he was also an admirer of the French military tradition. Both his French heritage and his interest in matters military were deeply to influence his loyalties and historical perspective throughout his life.

Also, perhaps, he was seeking to impress Elodie Hogan, with whom he remained in contact. He enlisted in November 1891, and joined an artillery regiment based in the garrison town of Toul. Although it was an interesting experience, it proved to Belloc that he was a foreigner in France – an Englishman with a French father, rather than a Frenchman with an English mother.

Having returned home, Belloc decided to try for admission to Oxford University. He was accepted by Balliol College and went up in 1893 and was awarded a history scholarship. Belloc quickly made a name for himself as an orator and debater at the Oxford Union, and in November 1894 was elected President. He gained First Class Honours, but failed in his attempt to win a Fellowship at All Souls College. This disappointment, which he blamed on anti-Catholic bigotry (it is said that he irritated the examiners by placing a statuette of Our Lady on his desk), remained with him all his life. However, if he had succeeded, then All Souls would have gained an outstanding professor of history, but the name of Hilaire Belloc may well have been just the name of another Oxford Don.

Despite the rollicking good times in the Union dining hall, Elodie Hogan was never far from Belloc's mind, and, in 1896, Belloc returned to America to woo her. Elodie's mother finally capitulated, and the couple married in June of that year, at Napa, Elodie's birthplace. Carving out a career then became a pressing necessity, but at what? Belloc had published some verse, but he knew he was not likely to make a living out of poetry. The mainstay for the time being was lecturing, supplemented by private coaching, but he enjoyed considerable success with his *Bad Children's Book of Beasts* (1896), *More Beasts for Worse Children* (1897), *The Modern Traveller* (1898) and *A Moral Alphabet* (1899). In 1897, Belloc was to meet Maurice Baring, who became and remained a close friend until Baring's death in 1945.

And the family grew quickly: Louis was born in 1897, Eleanor in 1898, Elizabeth in 1900, Hilary in 1902 and Peter in 1904.

The Modern Traveller (1898)

Belloc's first substantial work for an adult audience, *The Modern Traveller*[4], was written in 1898 when Belloc was only 28 years' old. It is an amusing verse satire, which recounts, from the perspective of the narrator, a Mr Rooter, an expedition undertaken by two other speculators and swindlers, and himself, to Timbuktu. The other two, Commander Sin and Captain Blood, as we will see, lose their lives during the expedition.

Rooter first describes Henry Sin, and next, in even harsher terms, their leader, Captain William Blood:

Now William Blood, or, as I still
Affectionately call him, Bill, …

Just to stop there: in the approximately 1,200 lines of the poem, on at least 45 occasions Rooter refers to "Captain" or "Blood", and on four occasions calls him "William", but not on a single occasion does he call him "Bill"!

…Was of a different stamp;
One who, in other ages born
Had turned to strengthen and adorn
The Senate or the Camp.
But Fortune, jealous and austere,
Had marked him for a great career
Of more congenial kind –
A sort of modern Buccaneer,
Commercial and refined.
Like all great men, his chief affairs
Were buying stocks and selling shares.
He occupied his mind
In buying them by day from men
Who needed ready cash, and then
At evening selling them again
To those with whom he dined.

But Blood's true "vocation" was company promotion, and this was the genesis of the expedition to Africa. After an arduous sea journey during which the explorers are obliged to endure cold turtle soup, unsatisfactory asparagus and pâté, and champagne costing a shilling more than onshore, they reach their destination. "*Oh! Africa, mysterious Land! / Surrounded by a lot of sand*". There, they have the good fortune to run into "*The Lord Chief Justice of Liberia, / And Minister of the Interior*"

[4] Edward Arnold, London, 1898, illustrated by "BTB" (Belloc's close friend from Oxford days, Basil Blackwood).

who advises them to take a group of “free” Liberians, and then change their promised wages to indentured servitude. They follow this advice:

We did the thing that he projected,
The Caravan grew disaffected,
And Sin and I consulted;
Blood understood the Native mind.
He said: "We must be firm but kind."
A mutiny resulted.
I never shall forget the way
That Blood upon this awful day
Preserved us all from death.
He stood upon a little mound,
Cast his lethargic eyes around,
And said beneath his breath:
"Whatever happens we have got
The Maxim Gun, and they have not."
He marked them in their rude advance,
He hushed their rebel cheers;
With one extremely vulgar glance
He broke the Mutineers….

We shot and hanged a few, and then
The rest became devoted men.

Remember that this was published in 1898. Hiram Maxim had patented his machine gun in the 1880s, but it was not used in action in a serious way until some years after Belloc wrote this verse, in the Boer War. The words that Belloc put into Blood’s mouth concerning the Maxim Gun proved, in the light of the experience of the Western Front in the Great War, remarkably prescient.

Finally, the three adventurers reach their destination and the true nature of the venture is revealed. They happen across a heaving swamp, and Blood surveys it, tears of avarice rolling down his nose. Then, turning around to his companions:

He looked affectionately sly,
And said, "perhaps you wonder why
My feelings are so strong?
You only see a swamp, but I --
My friends, I will explain it.
I know some gentlemen in town
Will give me fifty thousand down,
Merely for leave to drain it."

A little later on we found
A piece of gently rolling ground
That showed above the flat.
Such a protuberance or rise
As wearies European eyes.

To common men, like Sin and me
The Eminence appeared to be
As purposeless as that.
Blood saw another meaning there,
He turned with a portentous glare,
And shouted for the Native Name.
The Black interpreter in shame
Replied: "The native name I fear
Is something signifying Mud."
Then, with the gay bravado
That suits your jolly Pioneer,
In his prospectus Captain Blood
Baptized it "Eldorado."
He also said the Summit rose
Majestic with Eternal Snows.

But they succumb to the plague, and in their debilitated state the three are dragged back to the native king's camp, where Sin and Rooter prevail upon the King to allow them to find a cache of buried treasure, leaving the unfortunate Blood as a hostage:

Poor William! The suspense and pain
Had touched the fibre of his brain;
So far from showing gratitude,
He cried in his delirium: "Oh!
For Heaven's sake don't let them go.''
Only a lunatic would take
So singular an attitude,
When loyal comrades for his sake
Had put their very lives at stake.

The King was perfectly content
To let us find it; – and we went.
But as we left we heard him say,
"If there is half an hour's delay
The Captain will have passed away.''

Of course, Sin and Rooter try to abscond, but, their hiding place having been discovered, they are dragged back to the camp:

With barbarism past belief
They flaunted in our faces
The relics of our noble chief;
With insolent grimaces ....

Rooter then describes the demise of Sin:

The horrors followed thick and fast,
I turned my head to give a last
Farewell to Sin; but, ah! too late,

I only saw his horrid fate –
Some savages around a pot
That seemed uncomfortably hot;
And in the centre of the group
My dear companion making soup.

And, in graphic (and absurd) detail, the torture to which Rooter himself was subjected:

They hung me up above the floor
Head downwards by a rope;
They thrashed me half an hour or more,
They filled my mouth with soap;
They jobbed me with a pointed pole
To make me lose my self-control,
But they did not succeed.
Till (if it's not too coarse to state)
There happened what I simply hate,
My nose began to bleed....

But:

My superhuman courage rose
Superior to my savage foes;
They worshipped me at last.
With many heartfelt compliments,
They sent me back at their expense,
And here I am returned to find
The pleasures I had left behind.

Rooter concludes:

Only permit me once again
To make it clearly understood
That both those honourable men,
Commander Sin and Captain Blood,
Would swear to all that I have said,
Were they alive;
but they are dead!

The Modern Traveller is a mordant satire of the immorality and hypocrisy of big business, the exploitative nature of Empire, and the intertwining of international finance with economics and politics, soon actualised in England's Imperial ambitions in Southern Africa in the Boer War of 1899-1902.

At least one commentator has criticised the poem as over-long, and the portrayal of native Africans as unsympathetic, but my advice would be not to over-think it; rather, to soak yourself in the pace of the narrative, the faultless rhyming and the exuberant fun.

In the next year, 1899, Belloc published *Danton*, his first serious historical work, and *A Moral Alphabet*, which enhanced his popularity as a writer of children's verse. Although in *Danton* there is fine prose, there is not a lot of humour. So let me give you letter **E** from his *Alphabet*[5]:

***E** stands for Egg.*

Moral
The Moral of this verse
Is applicable to the Young. Be terse.

and **J**[6]:

***J** stands for James, who thought it immaterial*
To pay his taxes, Local or Imperial.
In vain his Mother wept, the Wife implored,
James only yawned as though a trifle bored.
The Tax Collector called again, but he
Was met with Persiflage and Repartee.
When James was hauled before the learned Judge,
Who lectured him, he loudly whispered, "Fudge!"
The Judge was startled from his usual calm,
He struck the desk before him with his palm,
And roared in tones to make the boldest quail,
*"*J stands for James, IT ALSO STANDS FOR JAIL*."*
And therefore, on a dark and dreadful day,
Policeman came and took him all away.

Moral
The fate of James is typical, and shows
How little mercy people can expect
Who will not pay their taxes; (saving those
To which they conscientiously object).

Belloc and Chesterton meet

Belloc and Chesterton met in a Soho restaurant in 1900. Chesterton writes: "*When I first met Belloc he remarked to the friend who introduced us that he was in low spirits. His low spirits were and are much more uproarious and enlivening than anybody else's high spirits. He talked into the night, and left behind in it a glowing track of good things….*"[7]

Notice that GK says that "*he*" – Belloc – talked into the night!

---

[5] *Cautionary Verses*, Duckworth, London, Album Edition, 1940, p.309.
[6] *ibid*., pp.317-318.
[7] C. Creighton Mandell & Edward Shanks, *Introduction to Hilaire Belloc: The Man and His Work*, Methuen, 1916,
pp.vii-ix, quoted in Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc*, rev'd edn, TAN Books, Charlotte, NC, 2015, p.97.

There commenced a solid and enduring friendship, and great mutual admiration. Perhaps the friendship was *not* as close as some suppose (particularly having regard to the awareness in the popular imagination of the "*twiformed beast*", the Chesterbelloc). Indeed, in personality and style, Belloc was closer to Cecil Chesterton than to Gilbert. However, Belloc's friendship with GK was *closer* than others suppose: each dedicated books to the other, and GK was godfather to Belloc's son Peter who was given the second name of Gilbert, and the Bellocs and the Chestertons were frequent visitors at each other's homes.

But it is certainly going too far to say, as TS Moore wrote in a letter to WB Yeats, that they were, in any respect, "*the two buttocks of one bum*"[8].

The Path to Rome

The book which really put Belloc on the literary map was ***The Path to Rome***[9], published in 1902. It is a unique work, and Belloc remained proud of it to the end of his days. It has never been out of print. It is full of anecdotes, descriptions, sketches, maps, musings, reflections, history and opinions – all written with a confident, optimistic, Rabelaisian exuberance.

In the Introduction, Belloc describes his visit to his birthplace near Paris, and his sudden vow to go to Rome on pilgrimage from Toul, where he served in arms: "*I will walk all the way and take advantage of no wheeled thing; I will sleep rough and cover thirty miles a day, and I will hear Mass every morning; and I will be present at high Mass in St Peter's on the Feast of St Peter and St Paul*". He kept the last vow, but, he says, "*All my other vows I broke one by one.*"[10]

But the first vow only once; he managed the rest of this extraordinary journey on foot, covering 1,200km in three-and-a-half weeks (an average of 50km per day), following a direct line to Rome wherever possible, mostly over hilly or mountainous country, and sometimes through snow and ice.

Here is a sample:

> *Never ridicule windows. It is out of windows that many fall to their death. By windows love often enters. Through a window went the bolt that killed King Richard. King William's father spied Arlette from a window (I have looked through it myself, but not a soul did I see washing below). When a mob would rule England, it breaks windows, and when a patriot would save her, he taxes them. Out of windows we walk on to lawns in summer and meet men and*

---

[8] Letter dated 26 April 1911 from T. Sturge Moore to WB Yeats, in *Their Correspondence 1901-1937*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, p.20.

[9] George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London.

[10] *ibid*., pp.viii-ix.

women, and in winter windows are drums to splendid music of storms that makes us feel so masterly round our fires. The windows of the great cathedrals are all their meaning. But for windows we should have to go out-of-doors to see daylight. After the sun, which they serve, I know of nothing so beneficent as windows. Fie upon the ungrateful man that has no window-god in his house, and thinks himself too great a philosopher to bow down to windows! May he live in a place without windows for a while to teach him the value of windows. As for me, I will keep up the high worship of windows till I come to the windowless grave. Talk to me of windows![11]

Belloc the politician

In 1902, Belloc was naturalised as a British citizen. Having flirted with, and immediately abandoning, the idea of being called to the Bar, in 1904 Belloc decided on a political career and presented himself to the Liberal Party for adoption as a candidate in the constituency of South Salford, Manchester. He campaigned vigorously, and was elected in 1906.

In the same year, the Bellocs moved to 'Kings Land', Sussex, which was to be Belloc's home for the rest of his life. His Parliamentary duties severely circumscribed his ability to earn a living for his family (Elodie and he by now had five children), and it was therefore a great relief that, in September 1906, he secured the literary editorship of *The Morning Post*, a position he held until he was squeezed out in 1909. This occurrence made his dependence on writing books – what he described as his "hack work" – and lecturing ever greater, and raised his anxiety over his family's financial security to a high pitch.

He was never happy within the Party system, believing it to be thoroughly corrupt and corrupting, and although re-elected for a second term (with a reduced majority), Parliament was dissolved in 1910, and Belloc, fed up with the shenanigans, resigned. But while an MP, he was constantly active: travelling between Manchester and London, lecturing, coaching in Salford, writing books, and, during the 1907 recess, he crossed the Pyrenees on foot and walked, through the extreme summer heat, all the way to Madrid.

Despite his political commitments, Belloc still managed, in that four-year period, to publish no fewer than 20 books, including *Esto Perpetua*, *Hills and the Sea* (1906), *On Nothing* (1908) (dedicated to Maurice Baring), *On Everything* (1909), *On Anything* (dedicated to a friend George Lemmi), *On Something* (1910) (dedicated "*To Somebody*"). Subsequently Belloc published another volume of essays, titled *On*!

Loss, the Great War and the 1920s

In 1911, Cecil Chesterton and Belloc founded the journal *The Eye-witness*, with Belloc as editor. However, Belloc's talents and interests did not lie in editorship, and he relinquished it to Cecil in June 1912. At this time, the Marconi corruption and insider trading scandal erupted, embroiling Cecil Chesterton in legal action as

[11] *ibid*., pp.136-137.

defendant for criminal libel, which he lost, although ordered to pay only nominal damages.

In the meantime, Belloc kept writing at a furious pace, with history, novels, essays and *The Servile State* (1912) flowing from his pen or, I should say, from his secretary's, since Belloc's usual practice was to dictate. In between times, he made several walking tours in France and Germany, including a review of the sites of all but two of Napoleon's battles.

In 1913, Belloc's good friend George Wyndham died. Far more distressingly, in February 1914, his beloved wife Elodie died from influenza, leaving Belloc with five young children. The loss of Elodie was a tremendous blow. He left her bedroom exactly as it was when she was living, and he never thereafter walked past it without tracing with his finger on the door the sign of the Cross.

When, later that year, the Great War commenced, Belloc was engaged by the Australian, Murray Allison, to write a weekly article on the military situation for Allison's new weekly Journal, *Land and Water*. These articles initially enhanced Belloc's reputation as a military expert, but some of the lustre was subsequently tarnished by over-optimistic predictions about the outcome of the War (although, to be fair, his analysis largely depended on over-optimistic official reports).

Belloc suffered the loss of numerous close friends during the War: Raymond Asquith in 1915, Auberon Lucas (1916), Edward Horner and Basil Blackwood (1917), and Cecil Chesterton (March 1918). Worst of all, in August 1918, Belloc's first-born, Louis, who had joined the Royal Flying Corps, died in an aerial mission. His body was never found.

After the Armistice, Belloc became increasingly isolated, and he admitted to feeling his energies ebbing away in his sorrow and loneliness. However, if this is true, it is only in a relative sense. In the 11 years until 1929, Belloc published over 40 books, he travelled widely, including to Morocco on two separate occasions, made walking tours in France and Italy, and frequently undertook sailing voyages in his beloved yacht, the cutter *Nona* (which he had acquired 1901), with a variety of friends and family as crew.

Yet for all his activity in the period following World War I, Belloc was conscious of losing his relevance as a public figure, but he nonetheless aspired to remaining current. He continued to travel, and was granted an audience with Pope Pius XI (as he had previously with Pope Benedict XV). Some honours came his way. In 1920 Glasgow University conferred an honorary Doctorate of Laws on him, and, in 1929, he accepted the ribbon of an officer of the *Legion d'Honneur*, but he did not accept appointment as a Knight of the Order of St Gregory, desiring not to be considered an "official" Catholic.

Belloc the novelist

Belloc wrote a number of novels, but he was not at his best in this genre. Plot and the delineation of character were not his forte. It is significant that he often called

on Chesterton for assistance in the development of his novelistic characters. He would do this by treating a willing GK to lunch, and then describing the character he wanted. Chesterton would oblige in a series of rapid, brilliant pencil sketches, most of which would end up, unaltered, in the novel as published.

Here is a scene from **The Emerald of Catherine the Great (1926)[12],** which concerns the loss, and eventual retrieval, of the Emerald. A minor devil and a minor angel have a not insignificant role in the action. At one point, they are having a furious argument. Then, just as the angel is getting the worst of the argument:

> *… the Angel played the trick which I am sorry to say is always being played upon poor devils: he played the trick of the superior person.*
>
> *"Well," he said, "you may be right. I can't bother about it. I've got something else to do, and you can go back to hell."*
>
> *The Devil, stung beyond endurance, grappled and closed. They wrestled magnificently, and it was fifty-fifty – as it always is with devils and angels in this world – when the Angel began to get the worst of it. The Devil, though shorter, was in far better training – humanity had seen to that – and he was pressing the Angel down; when the Angel, without scruple, began to increase his size and strength prodigiously, till he towered above the poor Devil like a giant and half broke his back.*
>
> *"You're cheating!" gasped the Devil. "You're working a miracle!"*
>
> *"Anything's fair with Devils!" said that most unjust Angel.*
>
> *With which words he transferred himself into the sixth dimension, and the Devil, snubbed, angered, disappointed, impotent to revenge himself, burning to be eased by some ill-deed, flew through the night to the duchess's – it was only four miles – and inspired her with the odious thought that she should start yet another league for bothering the poor.[13]*

To the extent that there is a plot, it probably owes the greatest debt to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, but, even so, *The Emerald* is mostly a vehicle for Belloc's satirical treatment of the nobility, the upwardly mobile, the idlers, the plodding policeman, and every other member of society who makes an appearance in the work!

Belloc as essayist

The enormous output, wide range and high quality of Belloc's essays would alone have secured his place in English letters in the 20th century, but available time does not permit me to give you in this paper more than a couple of snippets. Here, I think, he was at his best in the period between the Wars. His early essays are to me rather self-conscious, mannered and too Rabelaisian in style, but, by the 1920s, his

12 Arrowsmith, London, 1926.

13 *ibid*., pp.156-158.

essay prose had become more reflective, personal and straightforward. And often humorous, and comical!

Short Talks with the Dead (1928)[14]

In the essay titled *True Advertising*, Belloc reports on an advertising congress which resolved that "*advertisements ought to tell the truth*". He delights in the prospect of this reform, and in the resultant betterment of "*our newspapers … our walls and the works of our great artists!*" He projects how this would play out in a series of hypothetical advertisements, of which this is from "*the people who sell chemical food*":

> "*This stuff which I am putting up in tins for you may be easily described. It is made from the flesh of the pig; honestly it is. Not from any part of the pig in particular, but just from any or all parts chopped up. Most of the pigs were healthy, and your chance of getting part of a bad one is quite small. On the other hand, it is only fair to tell you that I have put in a poison to keep the stuff from putrefying, and I have put in another chemical, not poisonous, to give it colour, and another chemical, which is only poisonous in very large amounts, to give it consistency. That is all I have to say about it. P.S. – Even the poisonous chemical is not there in such large quantities as to do you any immediate harm. Your health will gradually suffer, but you won't feel any acute physical pain until you have got a great accumulation of it into your system after many years.*"[15]

Or this from the motor car manufacturer:

> "*The only difference between my car and the others is that I am the manufacture of it. Anyone can manufacture a motorcar: or, to speak more accurately, anyone with capital can exploit other skilled men, poorer than himself, who know how to work in metal, and get them to make a motorcar. The difference of value between motorcars simply the difference in the excellence of the work and the power of the motorcar. Have you got that? If you buy my motorcar, I shall become rich. If you buy the other man's, I shan't. That is all there is to it. P.S. – The price at which I sell my motorcar is just over twice what it costs to make. The difference goes in bribes, advertising, commissions, blackmail and interest to the bank.*"[16]

Who says Belloc is no longer relevant?

A Conversation with an Angel (1928)[17]

This is one of my favourite collections of Belloc's essays. In the essay titled *On the Tears of the Great*, Belloc begins with a discussion on the use of Latin and Greek tags

---

[14] Jonathan Cape, London, 1928.
[15] *ibid*., p.175.
[16] *ibid*., p.176.
[17] Jonathan Cape, London, 1931.

but advises caution, both because the reader may suspect the author of making them up, and also because the author will probably get them wrong. However:

> *it is not so with William Shakespeare. You may quote from Shakespeare anything you like, and it will always pass muster, however bad, or commonplace, or silly, or profound. Was it not in this very spirit that I quoted a sham couplet of his, entirely of my own invention:*
>
> > *"Swift to your charges; nought was ever done*
> > *Unless at some time it were first begun."*
>
> *William did not write this; but he might have. It is just like him. It is true, and not worth telling, and it rhymes.*[18]

Then he proceeds to a catalogue of famous people who have wept, passing from classical and scriptural characters to historical figures; for example, Oliver Cromwell, whom Belloc loved to send up:

> *Cromwell was perpetually bursting into tears. He sniffed and rubbed his eyes to see Charles the King with his children. Tears rolled down his cheeks in prayer, and again in domestic bereavement. He was one of the great criers of history, an unfailing and repetitive, as it were chain-weeper. The second of the noble Hanoverians, whom I suppose I may call a Great Man, for he was of Nordic stock and reasonably rich, cried when his wife died; Dr Johnson at the memory of his mother, Pitt the Younger upon the news of Austerlitz, and under the effect of port; Macaulay (I am told) at the discovery of a stumer cheque…. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Laureate, wept, or at least allowed the tears to gather in his eyes, at the prospect of stubble in the English country-side. Carlyle wept when he thought of his wife after her death, and his wife when she thought of Carlyle before it. Louis XVI wept because he was hen-pecked, and Louis XV because he had no such luck, but Louis XVIII, if he wept at all, wept only through the excruciating agony of the gout*.[19]

Another essay, *On Not Knowing Where One is Going*, is rich in good sense, satire and gentle irony, and suffused with humour, and *good*-humour:

> *Oliver Cromwell said it in one of those very rare outbreaks of truth from his lips, for as a rule Oliver Cromwell feared the truth with a natural dread. But as he was also a very nervous, impulsive man, it broke out from him willy-nilly at times, and one of these times was that in which he said: "A man never goes so far as when he does not know where he is going".*
>
> *It is true that those who have made money are soon convinced by flatterers, and by their own silly pride, that they willed it all from the beginning. At least, they are so convinced on the surface. Within their hearts they know very well that the thing was a glorious accident, and they inwardly and secretly marvel how it can have come about. You may prove the truth of this in two excellent ways. One is*

[18] *ibid*., pp.418-419.
[19] *ibid*., pp.53-54.

the terror these men are in of new investments, and the other is the rapidity with which they often lose the money they have made….

No man knows where he is going…. There was a man who went out to look for donkeys and found a kingdom – which is much the same thing. There was another man who set out to do very hard work in order to maintain his family, pursued this course for over fifty years, and was astonished to discover that he had reached Paradise – but only after a certain shock called Death.[20]

It is not hard to see in this last paragraph a reflection of Belloc's own hope.

Belloc's as controversialist

My observations on the mellowing of Belloc's prose style does not necessarily imply that Belloc himself mellowed with the advancing years, and some mention should be made of Belloc's awesome capacity as a controversialist. In his essay *On the Selection of Books*, Belloc concludes with the recommendation to find a particular kind of book; that is "*the book written by an opponent: the book written in defence of what* [you] *hate*". Recommends Belloc: "*Fasten upon it the twenty claws of your soul … for of its* [Holy Writ's] *many rhetorical optative phrases (which long for the wings of a dove, for peace, for justice and, in exile, for the native land), none strikes a stronger chord in the human heart than that profound, that major cry, 'Oh, that mine enemy had written a book!' I am glad to say he sometimes has*."[21]

As Belloc said: "*I am a writer, a biter and a fighter*"[22], and HG Wells found this out to his cost. Wells wrote an *Outline of History*, the object of which, according to Belloc, was to discredit the Catholic Church. Belloc was probably right; in 1943, Wells wrote a small book, *Crux Ansata*[23], the first chapter of which is titled *Why do We not Bomb Rome?* Seriously.

Belloc wrote a pamphlet heavily criticising the *Outline*, and Wells published a riposte titled *Mr Belloc Objects*. Not to be outdone, Belloc responded with another pamphlet, *Mr Belloc Still Objects*, followed immediately by a book-length denunciation of the *Outline* titled *A Companion to Mr Wells's Outline of History*[24]. This is not the place for a discussion of this topic, but here is a paragraph from the first page of the *Companion*:

At the outset of my task it behoves me to set forth the great talents with which Mr Wells has been endowed by Almighty God, and especially the talents suitable to the writer of a general history. For, indeed, he seemed from his earlier works

---

[20] *ibid*., p.259, p.260, p.263.

[21] In *One Thing and Another*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1955, p.39.

[22] Quoted in Robert Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1957, p.402.

[23] Penguin Books, London, 1943, pp.7-8.

[24] Sheed & Ward, London, 1938.

admirably fitted for writing a general outline of history, and would, by the consent of all, have been thought apt for the task – had he not undertaken it.[25]

On the face of it, a sincere and genuine compliment in a paragraph, totally turned on its head by the last five words!

Belloc in later life

As I have said, from the 1920s, and with the dispersal of his family, Belloc became increasingly lonely, his loneliness relieved by his frequent visits to and from his friends in Sussex and London. His good friends Philip Kershaw died in 1924 and John Phillimore in 1926. Belloc's mother Bessie died in 1925, aged 95. Another grievous loss was the death of GK Chesterton in 1936, following which, for a time and to honour the memory of his friend, Belloc assumed the editorship of *GK's Weekly*.

Belloc continued his amazing productivity through the 1930s. From 1930 (when he turned 60) until the outbreak of World War II, Belloc published another 37 books; history, essays, children's verse, serious verse, novels, religion and controversy.

In 1937, he returned to the US to give a series of lectures at Fordham University and was given a private meeting with the President, FD Roosevelt. But in 1940 Belloc turned 70, and was feeling his age, and the world was engulfed by war. He wrote to a friend:

It is all due to Old Age, which is, I do assure you, the most horrible lingering (and incurable) disease ever pupped or calved. It's funny that the books lie so horribly about it! To read the books one would think that old age was a lovely interlude between the pleasures of this life and the blaze of Beatitude. The Books represent Old Age seated in a fine old comfortable dignified chair, with venerable snowy locks and fine, wise, thoughtful eyes, a gentle but profound smile, and God-knows-what-and-all! But the reality is quite other. Old Age is a tangle of Disappointment, Despair, Doubt, Dereliction, Drooping, Debt, and Damnable Deficiency and everything else that begins with a D.[26]

Although Belloc wrote half a dozen books in the early 1940s, he was by then largely a spent force, and he continued to live in seclusion at Kings Land. The defeat of France was a heavy blow, but a far heavier blow was the death in action of his son Peter, in service with the Royal Marines, in 1941. Shortly afterwards, Belloc suffered the first of a series of strokes. He published his last book, *Places*, in 1942. In 1943, Winston Churchill, to his credit, offered Belloc the Companionship of Honour, but Belloc, reflecting on the identity of other recipients of that distinction, politely declined. His dear friend of 48 years, Maurice Baring, died in 1945; his sister Marie in 1947. He spent the remaining years of his life at home, receiving visits from family and friends. On 15 July 1953, Belloc died, a few days short of his 83rd birthday.

---

[25] *ibid*., p.9.

[26] Pearce, *op. cit*., p.355, quoting Robert Speaight (ed.) *Letters from Hilaire Belloc*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1958, p.289.

Belloc's "rightful garden"

I would like in the last section of this paper to pay some attention to Hilaire Belloc in his "rightful garden". Just before Belloc married, he published his *Verses and Sonnets*. One of them is *Stanzas Written on Battersea Bridge*[27], which speaks of destiny and duty. The last stanza reads:

England, to me that never have malingered,
Nor spoken falsely, nor your flattery used,
Nor even in my rightful garden lingered:
What have you not refused?

At the time Belloc wrote this, the indications were that he wished to be known as a writer of verse, and in a conversation with Frank Sheed made clear that his "rightful garden" was the world of poetry. Baring, himself the writer of exquisite verse, was from the earliest days an admirer of Belloc's poetry and encouraged him in this pursuit. However, Belloc soon realised that that he would not be able to make a living out of writing verse, and he also understood that his life work was to be on the battleground of ideas. He accordingly deserted his rightful garden for prose because, even then, he knew that his job would involve fighting, and, as he put it in his conversation with Sheed referred to, "*one fights with prose*"[28]. He knew also, of course, that he would need to be able to provide for his wife and the children to come – and he had five by 1904.

These things he expressed in his Sonnet XXIX:

Would that I had £300,000
Invested in some strong security;
A Midland Country House with formal grounds,
A Town House, and a House beside the sea,
And one in Spain, and one in Normandy,
And Friends innumerable at my call
And youth serene – and underneath it all
One steadfast, passionate flame to nurture me.

Then would I chuck for good my stinking trade
Of writing tosh at 1s. 6d. a quire!
And soar like young Bellerophon arrayed
High to the filmy Heavens of my desire ....

But that's all over. Here's the world again.
Bring me the Blotter. Fill the fountain-pen.[29]

Belloc made no secret of his hope that his verse, if nothing else, would survive him. As late as 1941, he wrote to Baring, saying "*I am distressed at not being able to finish*

[27] *Collected Verse*, p.52.
[28] Quoted in Morton, *op. cit*., p.99.
[29] *Collected Verse*, p.37.

my verse"[30]. However, he was capable of putting this into perspective, quoting the poet who, asked if he expected his verse to win him enduring fame, replied: "*I shall have as much fame as a dead man wants*"[31].

Time forbids more than a sampling of Belloc's verse, but here are a few instances which display Belloc's ready deployment of humour, both in play and as a vehicle for often murderous satire (I do not include in these selections any of his children's verse, as these days this is his best remembered work). First, another sonnet (XXVI) (one of three on the same theme, all of which have the same first half-line):

The world's a stage. The trifling entrance fee
Is paid (by proxy) to the registrar.
The Orchestra is very loud and free
But plays no music in particular.
They do not print a programme, that I know.
The cast is large. There isn't any plot.
The acting of the piece is far below
The very worst of modernistic rot.

The only part about it I enjoy
Is what was called in English the Foyay.
There will I stand apart awhile and toy
With thought, and set my cigarette alight;

And then – without returning to the play –
On with my coat and out into the night.[32]

Belloc's particular poetic talent and the store he set by the choice of the exact word, and clarity and concision in expression, made him an outstanding epigrammatist, and here are a few of his gems:

VI ***On Hygiene***

Of old when folk lay sick and sorely tried
The doctors gave them physic, and they died.
But here's a happier age: for now we know
Both how to make men sick and keep them so.[33]

XII ***Epitaph. on the Favourite Dog of a Politician***

Here lies a Dog: may every Dog that dies
Lie in security – as this Dog lies.[34]

XIII ***Epitaph on the Politician Himself***

Here richly, with ridiculous display,

[30] Quoted in Pearce, *op. cit*., at p.371.
[31] Quoted in Morton, *op. cit*., at p.141.
[32] *Collected Verse*, p.35.
[33] *ibid*., p.154.
[34] *ibid*., p.155.

The Politician's corpse was laid away.
While all of his acquaintance sneered and slanged
I wept: for I had longed to see him hanged.[35]

XX ***On a General Election***

The accursed power which stands on Privilege
(And goes with Women, and Champagne and Bridge)
Broke – and Democracy resumed her reign:
(Which goes with Bridge, and Women and Champagne).[36]

And this, which he would frequently recite to his friends:

XXII ***Fatigue***

I'm tired of Love: I'm still more tired of Rhyme.
But Money gives me pleasure all the time.[37]

And finally, here is one of his finest, and most famous – in two lines the incontrovertible answer to pacifism:

XLII The Pacifist

Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight,
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right.[38]

In Praise of Wine

Some years before Belloc published the poem from which I will be reading in a minute, he wrote an essay titled *The Good Poet and the Bad Poet*[39]. It begins: "*Once there was a poet who wrote such beautiful poetry that he became immensely rich and built a large house of red brick in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead, where he lived surrounded by his friends, the Good Architect, the Good Painter and a few others of the same sort who had, like himself, made gigantic fortunes by their excellence in their respective arts*."[40]

The Good Poet, arriving home in his Rolls-Royce, runs over a man lying in the snow (who turns out to be the Bad Poet) and feels obliged to take him in, charitably allowing him to recuperate in the garage. Now it happened that the next day the Good Poet was hosting a dinner, and, having learned the Bad Poet's occupation, called him in from the kitchen and invited him to recite some of his poetry,

---

35 *ibid*., p.155.
36 *ibid*., p.156.
37 *ibid*., p.157.
38 *ibid*., p.160.
39 In *Short Talks with the Dead*, *supra*.
40 *ibid*., p.49.

whereupon the Bad Poet begins to recite what we know is (a draft of) Belloc's *Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine*[41].

The Good Poet impatiently interrupts him with a dismissive comment and asks for a "*patch out of the middle*". The Bad Poet tries a few more lines, but the Good Poet interrupts him again and demands just the very end. The Bad Poet, having recited the concluding lines, the Good Poet dismisses the poem as "*very bad indeed*", and, taking a magnificently bound volume of his own poetry, reads the only poem in it:

Wine exercises a peculiar charm,
But, taken in excess, does grievous harm.

The Bad Poet is then dismissed, only to die on his way downstairs, spoiling the party. The last paragraph of the essay is Belloc's editorialising: "*The moral of this is, if you can't write good verse, don't write any at all*."[42]

Let us now read some of that verse of the "Bad Poet", who we know (as if we couldn't guess) is Belloc himself:

Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine (1931)

The opening lines are those read by the Bad Poet at the dinner party:

To exalt, enthrone, establish and defend,
To welcome home mankind's mysterious friend:
Wine, true begetter of all arts that be;
Wine, privilege of the completely free;
Wine the recorder; wine the sagely strong;
Wine, bright avenger of sly dealing wrong,
Awake, Ausonian Muse, and sing the vineyard song!

These are rather conventional heroic couplets, but hardly soaring poetry. Belloc describes the diffusion of the grapevine from Persia, and how it was introduced into Europe and Africa. Here is how the vine is received in Italy:

The Vines, the conquering Vines! And the Vine breathes
Her savour through the upland, empty heaths
Of treeless wastes; the Vines have come to where
The dark Pelasgian steep defends the lair
Of the wolf's hiding; to the empty fields
By Aufidus, the dry campaign that yields
No harvest for the husbandman, but now
Shall bear a nobler foison than the plough;
To where, festooned along the tall elm trees,
Tendrils are mirrored in Tyrrhenian seas;

This is certainly better! But there is a sudden change of subject:

---

[41] *Collected Verse*, pp.176-181.
[42] *Short Talks with the Dead*, *supra*, p.56.

But what are these that from the outer murk
Of dense mephitic vapours creeping lurk
To breathe foul airs from that corrupted well
Which oozes slime along the floor of Hell?

Who are these awful creatures? As we soon discover, they are the teetotalling water-drinkers!

A primal doom, inexorable, wise,
Permitted, ordered, even these to rise.
Even in the shadow of so bright a Lord
Must swarm and propagate the filthy horde
Debased, accursed I say, abhorrent and abhorred.
Accursed and curse-bestowing. For whosoe'er
Shall suffer their contagion, everywhere
Falls from the estate of man and finds his end
To the mere beverage of the beast condemned.

The poet describes the day following the night's carousals for the wine-drinkers (who "*leap to life*") and the water-drinkers (who merely "*arise*"):

And when the course of either's sleep has run
We leap to life like heralds of the sun;
We from the couch in roseate mornings gay
Salute as equals the exultant day,
While they, the unworthy, unrewarded, they
The dank despisers of the Vine, arise
To watch grey dawns and mourn indifferent skies.

Nest a change of mood from the humour of exaggeration to seriousness – the poet becomes wistful with the recollection of the impermanence of earthly beauty and of the good things of earth, and the brevity of human life, and the contemplation of the final great step into the unknown.

And then in the last section of the poem, which I read in full, there is a further shift, to an intensely personal reflection on the coming end of the life of the poet himself:

When from the waste of such long labour done
I too must leave the grape-ennobling sun
And like the vineyard worker take my way
Down the long shadows of declining day,
Bend on the sombre plain my clouded sight
And leave the mountain to the advancing night,
Come to the term of all that was mine own
With nothingness before me, and alone;
Then to what hope of answer shall I turn?
Comrade-Commander whom I dared not earn,
What said You then to trembling friends and few?
"A moment, and I drink it with you new:

But in my Father's Kingdom." So, my Friend,
Let not Your cup desert me in the end.
But when the hour of mine adventure's near,
Just and benignant, let my youth appear
Bearing a Chalice, open, golden, wide,
With benediction graven on its side.
So touch my dying lip: so bridge that deep:
So pledge my waking from the gift of sleep,
And, sacramental, raise me the Divine:
Strong brother in God and last companion, Wine.

Who would have thought that from those first conventional couplets at the beginning of the poem we would end up here? We know that Belloc was pleased with this poem, as well he should have been.

To conclude

We all know Chesterton's *Wine and Water* from *The Flying Inn*:

Old Noah he had an ostrich farm and fowls on the largest scale,
He ate his egg with a ladle in an egg-cup big as a pail,
And the soup he took was Elephant Soup and the fish he took was Whale,
But they all were small to the cellar he took when he set out to sail,
And Noah he often said to his wife when he sat down to dine,
"I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine."[43]

This of course is not intended to be a serious comparison with Belloc's poem, and it must be said that Belloc never attempted anything of the scope and epic grandeur of Chesterton's *The Ballad of the White Horse*. In this as in other areas, their talents and achievements were different and complementary. But, at this Chesterton Conference it is appropriate to close by acknowledging the role that both played in the shaping or reshaping of the intellectual climate of the West, from the late 19th century up to our own day, and specifically in the defence and restoration of the Catholic faith and Catholic culture.

Chesterton or Belloc? Thankfully, it is not an either/or, and in their voluminous writings, we can enjoy them both to the full, according to our taste.

And speaking of taste, and as we are about to break for lunch, let me conclude with some lines from Belloc's poem *On Food*[44]:

Alas! What various tastes in food;
Divide the human brotherhood!
Birds in their little nests agree
With Chinamen, but not with me;
Colonials like their oysters hot,

[43] GK Chesterton, *The Flying Inn*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1924, p.51.
[44] *New Cautionary Tales*, in *Cautionary Verses*, *supra*, pp.144-151.

Their omelettes heavy – I do not.
The French are fond of slugs and frogs,
The Siamese eat puppy-dogs….

The Spaniard, I have heard it said,
Eats garlic, by itself, on bread:
Now just suppose a friend or dun
Dropped in to lunch at half-past one
And you were jovially to say,
"Here 's bread and garlic! Peg away!"
I doubt if you would gain your end
Or soothe the dun, or please the friend….

And·I with these mine eyes have seen
A dreadful stuff called Margarine
Consumed by men in Bethnal Green.
But I myself that here complain
Confess restriction quite in vain.
I feel my native courage fail
To see a Gascon eat a snail;
I dare not ask abroad for tea;
No cannibal can dine with me;
And all the world is torn and rent
By varying views on nutriment.
And yet upon the other hand,
De gustibus non disputand–
–um.

John O'Halloran is a corporate and business lawyer who has been in practice for over 40 years, and founded his own law firm, O'Hallorans, in Sydney in 2000. He was previously a partner in the firm now known as Ashurst, and previously worked for the leading US firm of Chadbourne & Parke (now merged with Norton Rose Fulbright). John has been a devotee of Chesterton since his teen years, but discovered Belloc somewhat later, and the works of both occupy a prominent place in John's library. He has also studied the ancient Latin Classics, and revived his interest in them thanks to Latin courses conducted by Campion College, and, since 2012, Campion's biennial Rome Summer Schools.

A Night at the Uproar:
G.K. Chesterton and the Marx Brothers

Karl Schmude

I would like to begin with a familiar Chesterton quote:

> *"The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, . . ."*

This is the opening line of Chesterton's novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), and it has often been quoted as a piece of playful nonsense. Yet it could almost pass for a line from a Marx Brothers' movie. Groucho Marx in particular lifted frivolousness and inanity to a new level of intellectual cleverness! Most of his remarks were more absurd – and certainly crueller – than anything Chesterton ever said. For example:

- *"You've got the brain of a four-year old boy, and I bet he was glad to get rid of it."*
- *"She got her looks from her father. He's a plastic surgeon."*

- *"I've had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn't it."*
- *"He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot."*
- *"Outside of a dog a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read."*

No doubt these statements sound nonsensical. But the fact that nonsense can make us laugh says something – something profound – about our human nature. Chesterton himself dealt with this in one of his earliest writings as a journalist. In 1901, he published his first work of prose, a book of essays called *The Defendant*, in which he brought together a series of "defences" of ordinary things, ordinary realities, that are often overlooked or ridiculed – such as "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls", "A Defence of Rash Vows", and "A Defence of Skeletons".

One essay in this volume is entitled "A Defence of Nonsense", and I'd like to reflect on key parts of his argument. In the first place, Chesterton argues that nonsense is an essential part of human understanding. It is connected with the world of poetry and allegory, and provides a balance to the world of reason. It is important to stress that this is not an assertion of irrationalism on Chesterton's part – an argument *against* reason. Rather, it is an argument *for* the things that transcend reason, that balance reason, that keep reason in its proper place of importance, but not of exclusive supremacy that leads to distorted understanding. In short, I think, Chesterton is speaking of "*non*-sense", not "*anti*-sense".

In this essay, he looks at the history of what he calls "the literature of nonsense". He notes that some of the world's greatest writers, such as Aristophanes and Rabelais, engaged in such writing, but he characterises this as "the instinct of satire" rather than, in the strict sense, "the instinct of nonsense"; that is, they took the features of a particular person and exaggerated them for symbolic effect – by contrast with nonsense which, for no particular reason, imagines those features on another person. [45]

Chesterton himself indulged in satire on occasions, especially in the cause of Catholic apologetics. For example, he produced an imaginary interview to satirise popular intellectuals like H.G. Wells, who, in his *Outline of History*, showed a naïve belief in evolution as a scientific theory supplanting any faith in the spiritual insights of the Bible. Chesterton's imaginary interview began by recording

> *. . . the recently discovered traces of an actual historical Flood: a discovery which has shaken the Christian world to its foundations by its apparent agreement with the Book of Genesis. . . .*

[45] G.K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Nonsense", *The Defendant* (London: Dent, 1901), p.64-65.

> *Mr H.G. Wells exclaimed: 'I am interested in the Flood of the future, not in any of these little local floods that may have taken place in the past. I want a broader, larger, more complete and co-ordinated sort of flood: a Flood that will really cover the whole ground. . . .* Après moi le Déluge. *Belloc in his boorish boozy way may question my knowledge of French: but I fancy that quotation will settle him.'*[46]

In the course of his "Defence of Nonsense" essay, Chesterton points out that the idea behind nonsense is that of *escape* - escape, not ***from*** something, but, as he puts it, ***to*** something – an escape "into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness".[47]

It seems to me that this general insight of Chesterton's touches on the nature of the Marx Brothers' humour. Their humour has often been characterised as bringing chaos to an apparently fixed order – and yet their humour is, in essence, an attack on the falsity of that order, reinforced as it was by pomposity and complacency, by snobbery and hypocrisy. Nobody, as one critic said, could "unstuff a stuffed shirt" more quickly, and more comprehensively, than Groucho Marx! The British journalist Bernard Levin once commented:

> *When Harpo eats the lighted candle, the thermometer, the telephone, the cups and saucers, when Chico double-crosses everybody at once, when Groucho flings his restaurant bill before a beautiful stranger with a cry of 'This is an outrage! If I were you I wouldn't pay it!', they are loosening the bonds that bind society, and in doing so, loosening the bonds that bind us in the audience, that inhibit us from total surrender to their assaults on reason logic, propriety and the language.*
>
> *When the bonds are released, that surrender takes place; there are no lukewarm admirers of the Marx Brothers and anyone who finds them funny at all has also, at times, found himself physically helpless, and almost ill with laughter.*[48]

Returning to Chesterton's essay, he further notes that nonsense emanates from an ordered world of moral realism. It is not a mere aesthetic fancy or fantasy, or a personal preference. It relies on "a rich moral soil" for its development. As he points out:

> *Every great literature has always been allegorical – allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The* Iliad *is only great because all life is a battle, the* Odyssey *because all life is a journey, the Book of Job because all life is a riddle. . . . It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not (as has been represented by the merely rational religionism of the eighteenth century) a*

[46] Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), p.430.
[47] G.K. Chesterton, *op.cit*., p.65.
[48] Bernard Levin, "Laughter in Paradise," *The Observer* (London), 21 May 1972.

picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it.[49]

Chesterton offers a similar argument in his great study of Christian anthropology, *The Everlasting Man.* He argues that, to understand the Christian view of human nature, it is best to be *inside* Christendom as a believing Christian; but the next best thing is to be really *outside* it - for example, someone like Confucius[50] - rather than being in the position of popular critics of Christianity in the West who occupy a kind of half-way house: they live in the shadow of the faith, in growing darkness; they live off its spiritual capital; and they draw on its moral heritage – but they no longer believe it. And so it is ceasing to be sustainable as the bedrock of our culture.

Thus, the alternative to a sane vision of man, Chesterton proposes, is a *mad* vision – that is, seeing man as a strange animal; but then, as you work through that apparent equivalence [of man and animal], you realise that, to regard man as an animal reveals more and more that he is *not* an animal, that he has a unique nature – a soul, a spiritual sensibility and yearning, a free will, a power of speech, a capacity to draw and paint - that marks him out entirely from that of an animal.[51]
To turn to Chesterton's great work of Christian sociology, *What's Wrong with the World* - there is another, commonly quoted statement that seems like an echo of the Marx Brothers: ". . . if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly."[52]

This is not nonsense, I think, but actually something else – namely, **paradox**: the idea that truth is best understood as a single reality comprised of a balance between apparently competing, and even conflicting, truths. This balance can be tense and is certainly dynamic, and the effect can seem a contradiction, and even an absurdity. So, in the case of "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly," Chesterton is saying: if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing because it's important and worthwhile, ***even*** if we don't do it well – ***even*** if we do it badly. This applies, as Chesterton made clear, to the most important things most ordinary people do – such as marriage, parenting, work, and friendship – and even if we do them imperfectly (which everyone does), they're worth doing!

Chesterton thought that the history of heresies, of intellectual mistakes - with enormous religious and social and political consequences - revealed the importance and value of paradox. Heresies consist of emphasising one truth at the expense of another – plucking one truth, as it were, out of the treasury of truths, and making it the whole truth. The tendency reflects an inability to keep two truths alive at the same time, without diluting or denying them. The result of isolating one truth and making it the whole truth disturbs the delicate balance of truths, and it is this which leads to the intellectual error that is heresy. In other words, heresy begins with truth, but it ends with the distortion, and even the denial, of truth.

---

[49] G.K. Chesterton, *op.cit.,* pp.68-70.
[50] G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1925), pp.xii-xiv.
[51] Ibid., p.xxii.
[52] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Cassell, 1910), p.254.

Chesterton illustrates what he means in the central chapter of *Orthodoxy*, his great apologia of faith. There he explains that the truths about God and man are best expressed in paradox; that reconciling, for example, the justice of God with the mercy of God should be done, not by simply combining them, which is likely to mean diluting them, reducing them to a lowest common denominator; but rather, by combining them as "furious opposites" – keeping them both, and "keeping them both furious." So he took the virtue of courage, and pointed out the paradox at the centre of courage - that it means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die; corresponding to Christ's words that "He that will lose his life, the same shall save it." In a similar way, modesty, as "the balance between mere pride and mere prostration," is founded on the truth, enshrined in the Christian faith, that man has been exalted by his being made in the image and likeness of God, and yet humbled by the weakness of sin and the chronic misuse of his freedom. As Chesterton put it:

> *In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am* a *man I am the chief of sinners.*[53]

Just as paradox was such an essential part of Chesterton's outlook, I think it pinpoints a key element in the humour of the Marx Brothers – namely, their embrace and embodiment of paradox.

For the Marx Brothers, this usually took the form of declaring one truth, or an expectation founded on a truth, and then overturning it with another. To cite a couple of examples of the Marx Brothers combining and then shattering truths to produce a humorous paradox:

When they appeared on Broadway, one of the younger Marx Brothers came to Groucho on the stage and said: "Dad, the garbage man is here." To which Groucho answered: "Tell him we don't want any." So, there is a familiar call about the arrival at the door of someone who performs a service. This would create the expectation to respond by putting out the garbage; and then, it is upended by an answer that puts the garbage man into the same category as the milkman, or the mailman, who delivers rather than collects something!

Another example: Groucho receives a report from an official who expresses the hope that it's clear. "Clear?" says Groucho. "Why, a four-year old child could understand this. Run out and find me a four-year old child – I can't make head or tail of it!" Again, we have the conventional statement of promise – that even a child could understand this – which is then dashed by Groucho's riposte!

Thus we have this combination of a truism that we can understand, followed by an unexpected reversal – almost a statement of nonsense, in the Chestertonian sense of something that is outside of or beyond reason; that is not irrational, but ***is*** paradoxical – that involves a mixture and balance of truths that represent an assertion of reality with an acceptance of mystery.

[53] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1908), pp.171-172.

It is reminiscent of the paradoxical plea of a modern Jewish philosopher:

> *Why is God making me suffer so much just because I don't believe in him*.[54]

As I ponder the humour of the Marx Brothers, I see it as a kind of comical counterpart to – even a comical extension of – the serious paradoxes that Chesterton found in creation.

Let me move to another dimension of humour which Chesterton and the Marx Brothers shared – and that is, the place and importance of **exaggeration**. We may immediately shrink from such a notion, that exaggeration is something positive, something to be valued. Shouldn't we be resisting exaggeration? Shouldn't we be prizing moderation? But Chesterton argued that exaggeration was a sign of a healthy human life - and a healthy culture. In his book on Charles Dickens, still regarded as one of the classic studies of Dickens, he argued that exaggeration is an index of how much we believe in something, and in that sense care about it. It is only the things we doubt, said Chesterton, what we don't believe in or don't feel strongly about, that causes mildness - and a sedateness bordering on passivity and virtual indifference. In his words:

> *For we are all exact and scientific on the subjects we do not care about. . . . But the moment we begin to believe a thing ourselves, that moment we begin easily to overstate it; and the moment our souls become serious, our words become a little wild.*[55]

It was this insight that led Chesterton to take a different view of something much abhorred today, and applied in a rather indiscriminate way to what is thought to be objectionable - namely, bigotry. In 1905, Chesterton wrote *Heretics*, in which he dealt with various popular writers of his time, such as George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells. They were commonly seen as "prophets" – writers who were saying things that seemed radical and revolutionary, who were thought to see the way the future was unfolding – and progressing, inexorably. By contrast, Chesterton believed they were, in a strict sense, "heretics", because they had latched on to a single truth, and by exaggerating it, they had upset the balance of truths that keeps a person, and a society, sane. They had, in effect, diminished or denied certain truths about the world, and exalted one truth at the expense of others. So their revolutionary calls resulted, not from the novelty of what they were proclaiming but from the novelty of its isolation and unbalanced emphasis. They would, for example, stress God's mercy at the expense of His justice – or His justice at the expense of His mercy. They would highlight the human capacity to be forward-looking and creative, but ignore or overlook our tendency to be self-centred and destructive. In each case, this false and obsessive emphasis is what made them

---

[54] Hershey H. Friedman and Linda Weiser Friedman, *God Laughing: Sources of Jewish Humor* (New Brunswick, NJ: transaction Publishers, 2014), p.116.
[55] G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London: Methuen, 1906), pp.18-19.

"heretics". It is what made them sound radical – and what, finally, made them mad; and the society, engulfed by these isolated and unbalanced ideas, mad.

To focus on what Chesterton had to say about bigotry. In a final chapter of *Heretics*, he notes that a major objection to people having beliefs in modern times (he said this over a century ago – how little seems to have changed!) is the idea that any firm beliefs represent extreme convictions, and that extreme convictions have been responsible in the past for what is called bigotry.

Chesterton argued, on the contrary, that bigotry is a "sluggish and fundamentally frivolous condition",[56] and that the people who are most bigoted are actually those who have no convictions at all. They don't know very much – of history or religion or human nature or anything else – and they don't take seriously enough these great realities (of the experiences of the past or the deep and enduring truths of the present) – to hold convictions about them; but they can be dismissive of those whom they see, in the coloured beams of contemporary intellectual and social fashion, as representatives of the disgusting. As Chesterton put it:

> *The man who understands the Calvinist philosophy enough to agree with it must understand the Catholic philosophy in order to disagree with it. It is the vague modern who is not at all certain what is right who is most certain that Dante was wrong.*
>
> *The serious opponent of the Latin Church in history, even in the act of showing that it produced great infamies, must know that it produced great saints. It is the hard-headed stockbroker, who knows no history and believes no religion, who is, nevertheless, perfectly convinced that all these priests are knaves.*[57]

We would automatically suppose nowadays that bigotry means an extreme and passionate attitude, based on dogmatic belief - and specially directed, in our age of identity politics, at certain groups or classes. But Chesterton argues, on the contrary, that bigotry is really the anger of those who have no opinions:

> *It is the resistance offered to definite ideas by that vague bulk of people whose ideas are indefinite to excess. Bigotry may be called the appalling frenzy of the indifferent. This frenzy of the indifferent [Chesterton goes on, seeming to propose an absurdity that is really a paradox, I think, worthy of the Marx Brothers!] is in truth a terrible thing; it has made all monstrous and widely pervading persecutions. In this degree it was not the people who cared who ever persecuted; the people who cared were not sufficiently numerous. It was the people who did not care who filled the world with fire and oppression . . . . There have come some persecutions out of the pain of a*

[56] G.K. Chesterton, Heretics (London: Bodley Head, 1905), p.299.
[57] Ibid., pp.297-208.

passionate certainty; but these produced, not bigotry, but fanaticism – a very different and a somewhat admirable thing. [58]

Chesterton, later in the book, describes fanaticism as "a certain concentration, exaggeration, and moral impatience".[59]

I suspect that Chesterton would have seen our much-vaunted contemporary virtue of "tolerance" – more honoured, it seems these days, in the breach than in the observance - as a *companion* of bigotry, not a counter to it. I think he would have seen tolerance as reflective, not of belief, or of the enlightenment and strength of mind and understanding that come from conviction, but rather of indifference, of a deep refusal to care about truth.

In the light of Chesterton's understanding of bigotry, it seems to me easier to understand identity politics – the obsessive concern with categories of race and class and gender that now dominates our political and cultural life. How did it grow out of a philosophy of professed tolerance – the view attributed to Voltaire ("I disapprove of what you say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it")? How did it develop from this into an ideology of extreme *intolerance*, where certain views are now banned, not debated? Not tolerated at all – so that Voltaire's statement has become a perversion of what he once reportedly proclaimed. As Ronald Reagan described the attitude of the modern liberal: "I will defend to the death your right to agree with me."[60]

That was a diversion - but the subject of humour inevitably raises matters of deep seriousness!

Let me return to the subject of exaggeration. A further aspect of it, relevant to the humour of Chesterton and the Marx Brothers, is Chesterton's insight into the differences in the quality of humour between America and England – and by extension, I think, the quality of humour in Australia.

Chesterton thought that the essential difference between American and English humour lay in this – that American humour relies on a building-up, a huge exaggerating, of reality – what he calls "a soaring imagination, piling one house on another in a tower like that of a sky-scraper". By contrast, English humour involves a putting-down, giving rise to a sort of bathos and anti-climax for its effect. Both *exaggerate*, one upwards, the other downwards; one ballooning reality, the other deflating reality. Both derive their comical energy from exaggeration – "the American making life more wild and impossible than it is, and the Englishman making it more flat and farcical than it is".[61]

---

[58] Ibid., p.298.
[59] Ibid., p.299.
[60] Steven F. Hayward, *Greatness: Reagan, Churchill and the making of Extraordinary Leaders*, Crown Publishing, 2005, ch.6.
[61] G.K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968; orig. pub.1922), pp.163-165.

A final issue I would like to canvas is the *spiritual significance* of humour. Can we link the experience of laughter with the deepest part of our nature? Might we even suggest that humour has a salvific effect – and is of benefit for our souls?

At the *natural* level, laughter certainly involves an enormous and unrivalled release. I recall my father's memory of coming out of a theatre in the early 1930s, in the depth of the Great Depression, having watched a Marx Brothers' movie, and feeling - in company with so many - liberated, and vindicated, and almost "redeemed". At last those who had inflicted this suffering on us were being repaid – by being mocked, and put in their place. How special it was to have one or two hours of hilarious assaults on the power of the proudly complacent, the false authority and greed of those who had inflicted such misery!

Yet the benefits of humour can rise above the natural to the *supernatural*. They acquire spiritual significance – and they have spiritual roots, which Chesterton explains in his writings, and the Marx Brothers enact in their movies.

In a number of essays, Chesterton makes clear the spiritual sources of humour – and the extent to which it is impossible to understand laughter without some kind of spiritual vision and religious doctrine; without, in fact, a belief in God. Chesterton does not propose that we might add "The Argument from Humour" to the Five Ways of St Thomas Aquinas, so that a further "proof" of the existence of God could now be proffered – amplifying St Thomas' other Arguments from Motion and Causation and Design and so on. Chesterton does not propose this additional proof (as a Sixth Way) – but, in effect, he makes a compelling case for it!

In one essay, for example, he highlights the connection between the humorous condition of human beings and the serious truth of Original Sin:

> *Unless a thing is dignified, it cannot be undignified. Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down; only that a man should fall down. No one sees anything funny in a tree falling down. No one sees a delicate absurdity in a stone falling down. No man stops in the road and roars with laughter at the sight of the snow falling down. The fall of thunderbolts is treated with some gravity. The fall of roofs and high buildings is taken seriously. 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.*[62]

Thus, there is this gap – not only a tragic gap but a funny gap - between **what we were made to be** (ie, creatures infused with the dignity of God and destined for eternal happiness with Him) and **what we are** (creatures who are proud and

[62] G.K. Chesterton, "Spiritualism," *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1908), p.203-204.

pretentious, and constantly seeking to make gods of ourselves). It is this gap, this contrast and incongruity, between our **human nature** and our **divine destiny,** that is so tragic, and so hilariously funny.

It is, incidentally, in this same essay that Chesterton uttered one of his most famous lines about humour and religion. He proposes that matters of the greatest seriousness should not simply be discussed seriously but also humorously – or, as he puts it, grotesquely. If a subject is of universal importance, you should not explain or defend it ***only*** with serious terms and outstanding examples. You should also explain it by reference to the ordinary and the apparently undistinguished. So if you have, let us say, a theory about human nature, Chesterton argues that you should not try to prove it simply by citing Plato and George Washington, but by "talking about the butler or the postman".

> *It is the test of a responsible religion or theory whether it can take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs. It is the test of a good philosophy whether you can defend it grotesquely.* [And his closing sentence is the oft-quoted one:] *It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.*[63]

In another essay, Chesterton discusses the nature of jokes, and stresses that they are essentially silly and senseless. There is no point, says Chesterton, in saying that a joke is silly: "All jokes are silly; that is what they are for." There is no point, he continues, in objecting to "senseless jokes": "The very definition of a joke," he says, "is that it need have no sense; except that one wild and supernatural sense which we call the sense of humour":

> *Humour is meant, in a literal sense, to make game of man; that is, to dethrone him from his official dignity and hunt him like game. It is meant to remind us human beings that we have things about us as ungainly and ludicrous as the nose of the elephant or the neck of the giraffe. If laughter does not touch a sort of fundamental folly, it does not do its duty in bringing us back to an enormous and original simplicity. Nothing has been worse than the modern notion that a clever man can make a joke without taking part in it; without sharing in the general absurdity that such a situation creates. It is unpardonable conceit not to laugh at your own jokes. Joking is undignified; that is why it is so good for one's soul.*[64]

As this statement implies, Chesterton saw humour as an answer to pride. In one essay, he calls it "the chief antidote to pride";[65] and in another essay, he offers a distinction between a "smile" and a "laugh", making clear, unsurprisingly, that he always favours laughing.

---

[63] Ibid., pp.202-203.
[64] G.K. Chesterton, "The Flat Freak," *Alarms and Discursions* (London: Methuen, 1910), p.200-201.
[65] G.K. Chesterton, "Humour," *The Spice of Life and Other Essays* (Beaconsfield: Darwen Finlayson, 1964), p.29.

> *Laughter has something in it in common with the ancient winds of faith and inspiration; it unfreezes pride and unwinds secrecy; it makes men forget themselves in the presence of something greater than themselves*. [66]

In his last "great book", *The Everlasting Man* (1925) - though Chesterton tended not to write "great" books, in that definitive sense, but to throw away his insights in all sorts of unremembered places. But, in *The Everlasting Man,* he pinpointed the unique quality of human beings as animals who are funny:

> *Alone among the animals, [man] is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter*. [67]

When we consider how Walt Disney and others, over the years, have made animals "funny", in cartoons and animated movies, it is only because they have projected them as essentially human-like. Animals are only funny when they are depicted and perceived as human beings. They are not funny as animals – they are only funny as human proxies. They are only funny when we project them as human-like. They then bear the mark, the eternal status and dignity, of creatures with a particular and enduring purpose designed by God. Human creatures, or animal creatures when they are portrayed as human, only become ridiculous because they are, first and foremost, invested with dignity. When they betray the dignity with which God invested them, when they do not use properly the free will which elevated them as human beings, then they become funny. Their pride is rebuked – but before this, their divine origin and condition are affirmed.

And so it is, at the supernatural level, laughter rises to the heights of paradise. Whether there will be "laughter in paradise", we can reasonably conclude that laughter prepares us for paradise – and is an intimation of eternal bliss!

Let me turn, finally, to a further spiritual aspect of humour – and that is, the religious sources of the Marx Brothers' humour, for I think these represent, to a large extent, the deepest roots of their humour.

The Marx Brothers were Jewish. Living in a small Jewish neighbourhood in New York City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they were surrounded by non-Jewish peoples – in particular, Irish and German and Italian, who were primarily Catholic. (A reason why Chico Marx sounded like an Italian immigrant in New York was because he recognized that the Italians ran the neighbourhood in which the Marx family lived, and he adopted an Italian accent so that he would be more readily accepted.)

I think it's instructive to ponder the ways in which their religious traditions and perspectives influenced their humour. The Jewish people, after all, have had an

---

[66] G.K. Chesterton, "Laughter," *The Common Man* (London; Sheed and Ward, 1950), p.158.

[67] G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1925), p.19.

enormous impact on humour, contributing more to the humour of the 20th century, and our own lives, than anyone else.

The history of movies in particular has been hugely shaped by the Jewish people. Nearly all of the big studios – MGM, Warner Brothers, Fox, Paramount – were founded by Jews, and a huge proportion of the big-name comedians have been of Jewish background. It has been estimated that, while only a small proportion of Americans are Jewish (about 2 per cent), 80 percent of major American comics have been Jewish. We think of Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, Walter Matthau, Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Phil Silvers, Jerry Seinfeld – and, of course, the Marx Brothers.

We can compare this tradition with the Catholic heritage in Hollywood – and the presence of comedians of Catholic background. I am thinking of Jackie Gleeson, Jimmy Durante, Fred Allen, Danny Thomas, Bob Newhart, Mary Tyler Moore, and Bob Hope (though he was not a born Catholic, but a convert).

There have been times when these traditions have come together. For example, the Marx Brothers' movie, *Duck Soup*, was brought to the screen by a well-known Catholic director, Leo McCarey (who made such well-known movies with Catholic themes, such as *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St Mary's*).

Similarly, if we look at primetime TV series – for example, *Hogan's Heroes* and *M*A*S*H,* we encounter Catholic actors (such as Bob Crane playing the part of Colonel Hogan) and Jewish comedians (like Werner Klemperer who performed as Colonel Klink, and the actors who starred as Sergeant Schultz, General Burkhalter and even the little French prisoner, Le Beau – all Jewish).

In *M*A*S*H,* the TV series was created by the brilliant Jewish scriptwriter Larry Gelbart, who wrote many of the episodes, while the actors, such as Alan Alda, Mike Farrell, and Loretta Swit (Major 'Hot Lips' Houlihan!) were Catholic. And the Jewish scriptwriters created a Catholic priest as one of the characters – Fr. John Patrick Francis Mulcahy. *Hogan's Heroes* and *M*A*S*H* are a testimony to the pervasive power of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in our culture, however dimmed it might have become in recent times.

What is distinctive about Jewish humour?

I suppose the most remarkable thing is that, in the light of their history of suffering and persecution, most horribly the Holocaust of the Second World War, the Jewish people would seem to have the least to laugh about! It's not surprising how dark and even desperate Jewish humour can be – and how the laughter it generates is so often based on a savage inversion, a turning upside down, of normal expectations. We think, for example, of Mel Brooks' famously black comment – that "tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die."[68]

[68] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/21470-tragedy-is-when-i-cut-my-finger-comedy-is-when

There are other special features of Jewish humour – and the Marx Brothers illustrate these in particular. One is the **ear for language** – the importance of the *word*. Jewish humour is full of word-play, as Groucho's one-liners - and his terrible puns - illustrate! And *Seinfeld* and *M*A*S*H* - those comedy series are full of the wittiest and most argumentative dialogue. There is a real love of language here, of the spoken word, which is very much part of Jewish culture and the Jewish oral tradition. When we ponder the importance of language in the Jewish tradition and the love of word play that is rooted in the Talmud, we might reasonably see them as **the People of the Word**.

By comparison, Christians might be regarded as **the People of the Word Made Flesh.**

We are, indeed, conscious of how the Old Testament paved the way for the New, but it is intriguing to consider how the humour of the Jewish people provides hints of the Incarnation – of God seeking, and finally consummating, a greater intimacy with His people. Two American scholars, Hershey and Linda Friedman, have argued that Jewish humour may serve to bring God closer to His creatures,[69] as though He were foreshadowing, through the history of the Chosen People, that He will finally seek a closer union, in which humour as well as seriousness will reveal His mysteries more fully and profoundly to his human creatures.

In Chesterton's play, *The Surprise*, the first half is performed by puppets, who are completely faithful to the script, but in the second half, human beings take over and, using their free will, make various changes and deletions as they go along, in the belief that this would improve the play. Eventually, the playwright himself, cries out from off-stage:

> *. . . [I]n the devils' name, what do you think you are doing with my play? Drop it! Stop! I am coming down*.[70]

This has been seen – by various people such as Malcolm Muggeridge - as Chesterton's sublime image of the Incarnation: of God deciding to come down, literally and physically, among His people. No other act of redemption would finally work among the human creatures He had created, and endowed with free will.

Let me move now to compare Jewish and Christian humour – the humour of the Jewish people as the People of the Word and that of the Christians as the People of the Word Made Flesh.

Christian humour contains some of the darkness and the hard edges of the Jewish tradition. Jewish and Christian humour, after all, share a common heritage – they have both, at different times, been a persecuted people, as they still are, and both see human beings as deeply imperfect and in need of salvation. But Christian humour is, perhaps, more positive and playful, a little less harsh, somewhat more

[69] Hershey and Linda Friedman, *op.cit*., p.36.
[70] G.K. Chesterton, *The Surprise* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953), p.63.

accepting, in a spirit of hope, of human nature and its weaknesses. I believe that this comes from the Christian belief in the Incarnation – the God of the New Testament, the Person of Christ, and the intimacy that Christians have with a God who took on our own human nature and identifies with our suffering, directly and in person; a God of mercy who saves rather than condemns. So Christian humour, it seems to me, is less savage, less self-deprecating; certainly more paradoxical, but more balanced and hope-filled.

There is another feature of Jewish humour worth highlighting – and that is, that the Jewish perspective on society is from the "outside", and much of its sharpness comes from being so often excluded.

Historically, the Jewish people have never been able, except perhaps in recent times in the State of Israel, to exercise power in conventional ways – such as political (and especially parliamentary) control, social dominance, or military might. They have relied on alternative sources of power – reason and argument, wit and humour. As the oppressed, they have used humour to demonstrate their superiority over the oppressor – so that, finally, they can show that, in the vision of Hans Christian Anderson, the Emperor has no clothes.

And this is the way of the Marx Brothers. As the British Catholic writer Paul Johnson has pointed out, the Marx Brothers provided an underdog view of the world of convention, since that is the way that the Jews have always seen majority society. [71] They are the quintessential "outsiders", who have coped with this position by mocking themselves, as "outsiders", as well as mocking others who are "insiders". Somehow, self-deprecation enhances their own image as a group, and gives them a certain license to deride other groups – those who control and dominate society. In the words of the Jewish American comedienne Roseanne Barr:

> *If you make fun of your own in front of the dominant culture here, you can live next door to them*[72]*.*

And occasionally, just occasionally, the outsider can seem to turn the tables – but even then, it can backfire!. We think of the man in Belfast one night, during the Irish Troubles, who suddenly feels the barrel of a gun in his back. The gunman says: "Are you a Catholic or a Protestant? "I'm neither," says the man. "I'm Jewish." The gunman bursts into laughter. "What's so funny?" asks the man. And the gunman replies: "I must be the luckiest Arab in all of Northern Ireland."

The creator of the TV series, *M*A*S*H,* Larry Gelbart, has said that his Jewishness has always influenced his script-writing:

> *Everything I do is tinged with the Jewish perspective as the*

---

[71] Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p.465.
[72] Friedman, *op.cit*., p.4.

> *"outsider" in American culture, the observer ready with a caustic or witty observation when you're lucky, someone on the defensive.*[73]

Comedy, says Gelbart, *'is a sword and a shield and we've* [ie, the Jews] *often needed both as a pe*ople.' To quote Mel Brooks again:

> *One of my lifelong jobs has been to make the world laugh at Adolf Hitler, because how do you get even? There's only one way to get even, you have to bring him down with ridicule.*[74]

The late Robin Williams, who regarded himself as an 'honorary Jew' (though he was raised a Christian) was once asked in an interview in Germany:

> *'Mr Williams, why do you think there is not so much comedy in Germany?' And Williams answered: 'Did you ever think you killed all the funny people?'*[75]

In *Hogan's Heroes*, it is Hogan (played by the Catholic Bob Crane) who repeatedly refers to Hitler as "Scrambled Brains", while it's Colonel Klink (played by the Jewish Werner Klemperer) who answers indignantly: "But this is our beloved Fuehrer!"

I would like to finish with two questions – and a Chesterton quote.

One question is a speculation – could Chesterton have featured in a Marx Brothers' movie? And if so, which one? My only thought is that he might have played the playwright in the 1938 movie "Room Service", in which the Marx Brothers are trying to get a stage play produced and funded while evading paying the bill at the hotel where they're staying. But since this movie was made two years after GKC died, this doesn't look promising – and, in any case, whether Chesterton might well have outwitted (in the literal sense) Groucho Marx is probably another reason he did not appear in a Marx Brothers movie!

The second question is an historical one. Which Marx would you prefer to have had dinner with - Karl Marx, the founder of Communism, or Groucho, the founder of 'Madcapism'?

The French have an expression – "*je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho."* Which translates as: *"I'm a Marxist of the Groucho variety."* In the 1960s and later, this line spread beyond France to many other nations. And when I have, over the years, thought of myself as a "Catholic Marxist", I certainly was referring to Groucho, not to Karl!

I would like to finish by quoting a well-known passage of Chesterton's, which forms the conclusion to *Orthodoxy*. It pinpoints why humour is quintessentially human –

---

[73] http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-090911-larry-gelbart-chicago-story.html

[74] Friedman, *op.cit*., p.4.

[75] Ibid.

while also providing, in the light of how God made us, an insight into the divine; for the only attribute which Christ did not share with us in assuming our humanity was our fallen nature, from which all humour springs. Here is Chesterton at his most stirring and exhilarating:

> *Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost causal. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet he concealed something. Solemn superman and imperial diplomists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet he restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.*[76]

Karl Schmude is President of the Australian Chesterton Society as well as a member of the Editorial Board of the international Chesterton Institute and a frequent contributor to its journal, *The Chesterton Review*. He has produced a biographical booklet on G.K. Chesterton (London; Catholic Truth Society, 2008), as well as booklets on other Catholic figures and subjects, such as Hilaire Belloc and Arnold Lunn. He has published extensively, both in Australia and overseas, on subjects associated with religion and culture - particularly literature, history, and education. From 1984 to 2000, he served as University Librarian at the University of New England in Armidale NSW, and subsequently was a co-founder of Australia's first liberal arts college, Campion College in Sydney, where the Australian Chesterton Society holds its annual conferences.

[76] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1908), p.297.

AUSTRALIAN CHESTERTON SOCIETY

Purpose

The Australian Chesterton Society is a national association devoted to fostering an appreciation of G.K. Chesterton's writings and the value of his thought in contemporary Australia.

The Australian Chesterton Society is part of an international Chesterton movement that seeks to promote the study and understanding of Chesterton's ideas and insights. Various members contribute to *The Chesterton Review*, the quarterly journal of the G.K. Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture located at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Several members serve on the Editorial Board of *The Review*. A second Chesterton journal of importance is the *Gilbert* magazine, edited by Dale Ahlquist, President of the American Chesterton Society, and published six times a year.

Historical background

The Society first developed as a regional body, having been established in 1993 by Mr A.G. (Tony) Evans as the G.K. Chesterton Society of Western Australia. During that period, the Society launched, in association with the University of Notre Dame Australia, an annual series of Chesterton Memorial Lectures, delivered by such

distinguished speakers as Rev Dr Paul Stenhouse MSC, Professor Pierre Ryckmans, Ian Wilson and Dr Race Matthews. It also held talks and debates as well as less formal meetings devoted to convivial conversation on Chesterton's works.

Conferences

In 2000, the Society became a national association at a major conference held in the ancient monastery town of New Norcia, north of Perth. Since that time the Society has staged conferences in such centres as Sydney (2001), Canberra (2002), and Melbourne (2004). Since 2007, its conferences have taken place at Campion College Australia in Sydney, Australia's first liberal arts institution of higher education.

AUSTRALIAN CHESTERTON SOCIETY

OFFICE-HOLDERS

President and Editor of 'The Defendant': Mr Karl Schmude

177 Erskine Street, Armidale NSW 2350. Phone: 0407 721 458.

Email: kgschmude@gmail.com

Secretary/Treasurer: Mr Ray Finnegan

13 Fossey Street, Holder, ACT 2611. Phone: (02) 6288 5137.

Email: range2@grapevine.net.au

Associate Editor of 'The Defendant': Mr Symeon Thompson

Email: symeonjthompson@me.com

MEMBERSHIP

Membership of the Australian Chesterton Society is available for A$30.00 per annum. It includes a subscription to the Society's quarterly newsletter, *The Defendant,* and can be arranged by contacting the Society's Secretary/Treasurer, Mr Ray Finnegan, 13 Fossey Street, Holder ACT 2611.

Email: range2@grapevine.com.au Telephone & Fax: (02) 6288 5137