

from the book: his wife. Because of her modesty and humility, she asked him not to talk about her. It must have been a difficult task for him to write about his own life without mentioning the greater half of it. But she probably knew, as he did, that if she had not made that prohibition, Chesterton's autobiography would not have been about himself; it would have been about her.

Chesterton's last words on this earth were a greeting to his wife. "Hello, My Darling." He died of congestive heart failure on June 14, 1936. Frances died only two years after her husband. George Bernard Shaw, who knew and loved them both, said the cause of her death was widowhood. They were indeed inseparable. Two shall become one. Gilbert and Frances are buried in the same grave in Beaconsfield, England.

G.K. Chesterton understood the breadth and depth of romantic love, and he lived it. His great book on St. Francis of Assisi was written during those few years when he was Catholic and his wife was not. He describes the romance, the love affair that St. Francis had with God. It is a love that only a lover can understand. It reveals both oneness and separation at the same time, both fulfillment and longing, the mystical connection between joy and suffering. In this book about the saint who has the same name as his wife, Chesterton says plainly: "Now there are those who do not believe that a heavenly love can be as real as an earthly love. But I do."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *St. Francis of Assisi, CW 2:99.*

## *Recovering the Lost Art of Common Sense*

The most famous thing Chesterton said is something he didn't say. He is always quoted as saying that when a man stops believing in God he doesn't believe in nothing, he believes in anything. It is a great line, and it is well worth quoting, and I have no doubt that Chesterton would agree with it and would be pleased to hear it quoted. But it's just not what he said. What he said was, "The first effect of not believing in God, is that you lose your common sense."<sup>1</sup>

Since the line never gets quoted correctly, let's quote it correctly again: "The first effect of not believing in God, is that you lose your common sense." That means that in order for us to recover our common sense, we have to recover our faith. In order for us to recover our faith, we need religious renewal and reform. History shows that reform is a thing that is indeed needed from time to time. And usually it is botched up every time it is needed.

In the matter of reforming things, as distinct from deforming them, there is one plain and simple principle; a principle which will probably be called a paradox. Let us say, for the

<sup>1</sup> And he gave the line to Father Brown, who said it in a story called "The Oracle of the Dog".

sake of simplicity, that there is a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, "I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away." To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: "If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you *do* see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it." This paradox rests on the most elementary common sense. The gate or fence did not grow there. It was not set up by somnambulists who built it in their sleep. It is highly improbable that it was put there by escaped lunatics who were for some reason loose in the street. Some person had some reason for thinking it would be a good thing for somebody. And until we know what the reason was, we really cannot judge whether the reason was reasonable. It is extremely probable that we have overlooked some whole aspect of the question if something set up by human beings like ourselves seems to be entirely meaningless and mysterious. There are reformers who get over this difficulty by assuming that all their fathers were fools; but if that be so, we can only say that folly appears to be a hereditary disease. But the truth is that nobody has any business to destroy a social institution until he has really seen it as an historical institution. If he knows how it arose, and what purposes it was supposed to serve, he may really be able to say that they were bad purposes, or that they have since become bad purposes, or that they are purposes which are no longer served. But if he simply stares at the thing as a senseless monstrosity that has somehow sprung up in his path, it is he and not the traditionalist who is suffering from an illusion.<sup>2</sup>

So, the problem with reformers is that they so often want to do away with things they don't understand. They apparently regard their lack of understanding as proof that the

<sup>2</sup> *The Thing*, *CW* 3:157.

thing is not needed. It does not occur to them that the tradition they are trying to destroy may have been put into place for a very good reason. Chesterton says, "A tradition is generally a truth",<sup>3</sup> and, "Common sense often comes to us in the form of a tradition."<sup>4</sup> The successful reforms in history have occurred when people reconnected with their roots and where they recovered their lost traditions. It is not the tradition that has gone wrong; it is we who have gone wrong.

In order to have reform, says Chesterton, to return to the form, we must have repentance. We must admit that we have gone wrong. The point of repentance is starting over, beginning fresh. The only fresh beginning is that which starts from first principles, which will always be fresh when all novelties are stale.<sup>5</sup>

Chesterton, as we know by now, favors the common sense of the common man as the basis for democracy. And when it comes to the idea of reform, he reminds us famously of the democracy of the dead. True democracy means respecting tradition: "It means giving a vote to the obscurest of all classes, our ancestors." It means not submitting to the "oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about".<sup>6</sup> To get at what we have in common, we have to go backward. It is ancient history that will unite us, while modern history has only divided us.

To say that new things like [rapid transportation and communication] have united nations is simply false. . . . It is not new but old things that unify mankind; it is at the back of

<sup>3</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, *CW* 2:204.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>5</sup> See *ILN*, September 4, 1920.

<sup>6</sup> *Orthodoxy*, *CW* 1:251.

history that we rediscover humanity; it is quite strictly, in Genesis or the beginnings that we find the brotherhood of men; even if some controversy continues about . . . Abel and Cain.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that the first family had its problems and didn't exactly set a good precedent for the rest of us. But the fact remains that the basic unit of society is still the family. Strong families make for a strong society. If the family is weakened, the society is fundamentally weakened. But even if we try to break the basic unit of society into smaller pieces, those pieces still have to be held together by a very strong cement in order for the larger structure of society to hold up, and the smaller the pieces the stronger the glue must be. Chesterton says the only glue strong enough to bind people together is religion.<sup>8</sup> If people abandon religion, they abandon each other. Art and culture, sports and games, political causes and commercial ventures all have their place in a society but a very secondary place. None of them are broad enough or deep enough to be a substitute for religion. And when we try to make them a substitute for religion, our society is in decline.

Most people are aware that something is quite wrong with our society. But most of us are in a daze about it. We feel quite lost. Man has always lost his way, says Chesterton, but our problem is that we have not only lost our way; we've lost our address.<sup>9</sup>

We have all read in scientific books, and in romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every

<sup>7</sup> *The Well and the Shallows*, CW 3:460.

<sup>8</sup> See *ILN*, January 13, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> See *What's Wrong with the World*, CW 4:77.

man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is. . . . The self is more distant than any star. We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are.<sup>10</sup>

The reason we have forgotten who we are is that we have been cut off from our traditions. We have not only lost the common sense that connects us to others; we have lost our own sense of identity. And, again, the thing that defines us, as individuals and as a community, is religion. That is the only thing that can give us an ultimate meaning and sense of purpose. When the majority of people lose their religion and their common philosophy, they are easy prey for what Chesterton calls the "thin and theoretic minorities".<sup>11</sup> By simply *having* a philosophy, even if it is a fallacy or a perversion, a small group can conquer the vast majority who have lost their philosophy. The abnormal gains an advantage over the normal. And this is exactly what we have seen happen in our society. A few small minorities with some strong but wrong philosophies, such as those that favor abortion and homosexuality, have managed to spread their poisonous ideas to the rest of society, because the rest of society has no cohesive ideas but only "a sort of broad bewilderment produced by the reading of newspapers".<sup>12</sup> (And Chesterton would certainly have added "by the watching of television".) Those thin and theoretic minorities do not represent the masses, yet because of the media, they seem to be everywhere, and they have contrived to destroy the role of religion in our society. The result, says Chesterton, is that now "there is no mental machinery for

<sup>10</sup> *Orthodoxy*, CW 1:257.

<sup>11</sup> *ILN*, December 20, 1919.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

common sense."<sup>13</sup> In order to have common sense, a society must have what Chesterton calls "spontaneous mental discipline."<sup>14</sup> We have lost ours.

How do we get it back?

First of all, we cannot deal with these problems superficially. Chesterton says we have to get down to fundamentals. We have to recognize that there is a battle between good and evil. And we have to recognize evil, which is always very recognizable and very obvious. But we choose to ignore it.

Men do not differ much about what things they will call evils; they differ enormously about what evils they will call excusable.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most insidious philosophies of the modern world is the bland tolerance of every other philosophy, the idea that it doesn't matter what you do or what you believe. Evil rushes in through the door of indifference.

Right is right, even if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong, even if everybody is wrong about it.<sup>16</sup>

In a confusing world we have to speak clearly. People will sneer at our words, calling them catchwords. But Chesterton says, "The words used by ordinary hardworking people have to be ordinary and rather hard-worked words."<sup>17</sup> We do not have to apologize for using the common words of common sense. Chesterton says, the great men of history had the common mind and they are great not because they

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *ILN*, October 23, 1909.

<sup>16</sup> *ILN*, May 11, 1907.

<sup>17</sup> *ILN*, July 3, 1920.

make every man feel small, but because they make every man feel great.<sup>18</sup> They help us to regain our vision of what's important, and to rise up and defend it or reclaim it.

There is something that is not plain about the plain truth. There is something uncommon about common sense. It has to be repeated over and over again because a million small distractions draw us away from the great truths. Chesterton is sometimes accused of repeating himself, but that is only because we need to be reminded of the simple, vital, basic things. Things like this: we must have a code of morals in a society; we have to teach this code of morals to our children; we have to believe our own beliefs enough to act on them in order to expect our children to believe us.

Everything has its place and proportion and proper use, and it is rational to trust its use and to distrust its abuse. The idea of "everything in its place" is the idea of the ordinary. G. K. Chesterton was an extraordinary man who defended ordinary things:

I am ordinary in the correct sense of the term, which means the acceptance of an order; a Creator and the Creation, the common sense of gratitude for Creation, life and love as gifts permanently good, marriage and chivalry as laws rightly controlling them, and the rest of the normal traditions of our . . . religion.<sup>19</sup>

According to Chesterton, Christianity is the religion that is most at one with common sense. It proclaims basic truths that can be relied on: that the world is real; that our actions have consequences; that truth itself is something solid and absolute; that we didn't just make it up. He says that all

<sup>18</sup> See *Charles Dickens, CW* 15:43.

<sup>19</sup> *The Thing, CW* 3:169.

religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it. Other religions and philosophies and heresies have tried to reduce Christianity to something less than itself, but they always make it too simple to be sane. The temptation of the philosophers is simplicity rather than subtlety.

The commands of Christ, says Chesterton, may sound impossible, but they are not insane. They are, rather, "sanity preached to a planet of lunatics".<sup>20</sup> When someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other. When someone steals your shirt, give him your cloak as well.<sup>21</sup> Why is that sanity? Because it really does make more sense to turn the other cheek in order to stop the insane cycle of revenge. It really does make more sense to give the thief more than he has stolen because he may need it, and what he needs most of all is grace and charity. That will serve to save his soul. His soul is more important than our clothes. And the main point of Christ's commands is that we should not take ourselves so seriously. Being able to laugh at ourselves is the key to humility and obedience. "If the whole world was suddenly stricken with a sense of humour it would find itself automatically fulfilling the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>22</sup>

The reason that Christianity is at one with common sense is that both are all about what is good for everybody. Only a religion of charity can be the glue to hold a society together. Christianity teaches us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and give shelter to the homeless. And Chesterton points out that this applies to spiritual poverty as well as physical poverty.

<sup>20</sup> *Twelve Types*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 5:39-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Twelve Types* (Norfolk, Va.: IHS Press, 2003), 66.

As we should be genuinely sorry for tramps and paupers who are materially homeless, so we should be sorry for those who are morally homeless, and who suffer a philosophical starvation as deadly as physical starvation.<sup>23</sup>

The Christian saints were famous for their great charity, and their charity was exactly what the world needed. They were mystics, but they were also very practical. The two go together. And that is why Chesterton says we will never recover common sense until we recover the mysticism of the saints. The saints are "wild and perfect".<sup>24</sup> They put their idealism in the right place and their realism in the right place. We have both things displaced. The saints put their dreams and sentiments into their aims, where they ought to be, and their practicality into their practice, where it ought to be. We have it backwards. Our dreams, we insist, are quite practical. But our practice is quite impractical. Our aims fall far short of heaven. Our practice falls short even of earth. And one of the main problems with our practice is that we don't do anything ourselves. We don't take responsibility. We leave it to the expert or to the public servant or to the private servant. We don't grow our own food; we don't build our own homes. We don't teach our own children; we don't even raise our own children. We leave everything up to someone else. We don't even think for ourselves. We even let others tell us what our tastes are. And, we don't even practice our own religion. It has become more convenient to leave that to others, too.

Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing

<sup>23</sup> *ILN*, November 24, 1934.

<sup>24</sup> *ILN*, March 28, 1908.

better. If our civilization goes on like this, only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.<sup>25</sup>

Whenever we have some crisis in society, rather than solving the crisis ourselves, we immediately make demands of the government for a solution. But a solution from the government always means a new set of laws and regulations. Chesterton says, "Modern man is in favor of introducing order into everything except his own ideas."<sup>26</sup> Excessive regulation and organization rests on a fallacy. It basically means turning men into machinery, and it is a mistake to think that machinery made out of men will be very efficient. The other problem with such schemes is that they must be enforced, which usually just means forced.

The point is, it is up to us to solve the crisis. It cannot be done for us. That is the disadvantage as well as the advantage of having free will. Common sense works only if we use it. Chesterton offers common sense both as a challenge and a comfort:

If men cannot save themselves by common sense, they cannot save each other by coercion.<sup>27</sup>

But what more can we have on our side than the common sense of everybody?<sup>28</sup>

In this book, we have covered some of the main ideas in Chesterton's writing. These are not mere literary themes; they are fundamental truths, and if we would take the trouble to understand them, they would rejuvenate our lives.

<sup>25</sup> *Heretics*, CW 1:164.

<sup>26</sup> *ILN*, April 1, 1922.

<sup>27</sup> *ILN*, September 29, 1923.

<sup>28</sup> *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, CW 6:308.

And they would help us recover the lost art of common sense. Let's review them very briefly:

First: our whole approach to life should be filled with wonder and gratitude. Thanks are the highest form of thought.

Second: truth is paradoxical. That explains why it is dignified and tragic when a man suffers, and why it is undignified and funny when a man sits on his hat.

Third: we are created in the image of God, which means we also are creators. Art is the signature of man. But art must connect. It has to connect to people, and it must also be connected to the eternal.

Fourth: we have a responsibility to pass truth on to our children. Therefore, education must be controlled by parents.

Fifth: temporary trends must never take precedence over permanent things. Fads and fashionable ideas always undermine the authority of the family and the Faith.

Sixth: democracy operates on the principle of common sense, the idea that people really can rule themselves if they truly have the freedom and independence to do so. Democracy means that self-government is better than big government, and that self-employment is better than wage slavery.

Seventh, eighth, and ninth: the world constantly tries to attack the Catholic Church or replace the Catholic Church or reduce and redo the Catholic Church, and in every case the result is something less satisfying, less balanced, and less complete than the Catholic Church.

And tenth: poems should rhyme.

Of course, there is one more thing we can do to help recover the lost art of common sense: read G. K. Chesterton.

tradicted by the senses and the reason; first because if the moon were made of green cheese it would be inhabited; and second because if it were made of green cheese it would be green. A blue moon is said to be an unusual sight; but I cannot think that a green one is much more common. In fact, I think I have seen the moon looking like every other sort of cheese except a green cheese. I have seen it look exactly like a cream cheese: a circle of warm white upon a warm faint violet sky above a cornfield in Kent. I have seen it look very like a Dutch cheese, rising a dull red copper disk amid masts and dark waters at Honfleur. I have seen it look like an ordinary sensible Cheddar cheese in an ordinary sensible Prussian blue sky; and I have once seen it so naked and ruinous-looking, so strangely lit up, that it looked like a Gruyère cheese, that awful volcanic cheese that has horrible holes in it, as if it had come in boiling unnatural milk from mysterious and unearthly cattle. But I have never yet seen the lunar cheese green; and I incline to the opinion that the moon is not old enough. The moon, like everything else, will ripen by the end of the world; and in the last days we shall see it taking on those volcanic sunset colours, and leaping with that enormous and fantastic life.

But this is a parenthesis; and one perhaps slightly lacking in prosaic actuality. Whatever may be the value of the above speculations, the phrase about the moon and green cheese remains a good example of this imagery of eating and drinking on a large scale. The same huge fancy is in the phrase "if all the trees were bread and cheese" which I have cited elsewhere in this connection; and in that noble nightmare of a Scandinavian legend, in which Thor drinks the deep sea nearly dry out of a horn. In an essay like the present (first intended as a paper to be read before the Royal Society) one cannot be too exact; and I will concede that my theory of the gradual virescence of our satellite is to be regarded rather as an alternative theory than as a law finally demonstrated and universally accepted by the scientific world. It is a hypothesis that holds the field, as the scientists say of a

theory when there is no evidence for it so far.

But the reader need be under no apprehension that I have suddenly gone mad, and shall start biting large pieces out of the trunks of trees; or seriously altering (by large semicircular mouthfuls) the exquisite outline of the mountains. This feeling for expressing a fresh solidity by the image of eating is really a very old one. So far from being a paradox of perversity, it is one of the oldest commonplaces of religion. If any one wandering about wants to have a good trick or test for separating the wrong idealism from the right, I will give him one on the spot. It is a mark of false religion that it is always trying to express concrete facts as abstract; it calls sex affinity; it calls wine alcohol; it calls brute starvation the economic problem. The test of true religion is that its energy drives exactly the other way; it is always trying to make men feel truths as facts; always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear, and devour the truth. All great spiritual scriptures are full of the invitation not to test, but to taste; not to examine, but to eat. Their phrases are full of living water and heavenly bread, mysterious manna and dreadful wine. Worldliness, and the polite society of the world, has despised this instinct of eating; but religion has never despised it. When we look at a firm, fat, white cliff of chalk at Dover, I do not suggest that we should desire to eat it; that would be highly abnormal. But I really mean that we should think it good to eat; good for some one else to eat. For, indeed, some one else is eating it; the grass that grows upon its top is devouring it silently, but, doubtless, with an uproarious appetite.

#### THE FEAR OF THE PAST

THE last few decades have been marked by a special cultivation of the romance of the future. We seem to have made up our

minds to misunderstand what has happened; and we turn, with a sort of relief, to stating what will happen—which is (apparently) much easier. The modern man no longer preserves the memoirs of his great-grandfather; but he is engaged in writing a detailed and authoritative biography of his great-grandson. Instead of trembling before the specters of the dead, we shudder abjectly under the shadow of the babe unborn. This spirit is apparent everywhere, even to the creation of a form of futurist romance. Sir Walter Scott stands at the dawn of the nineteenth century for the novel of the past; Mr. H. G. Wells stands at the dawn of the twentieth century for the novel of the future. The old story, we know, was supposed to begin: "Late on a winter's evening two horsemen might have been seen—." The new story has to begin: "Late on a winter's evening two aviators will be seen—." The movement is not without its elements of charm; there is something spirited, if eccentric, in the sight of so many people fighting over again the fights that have not yet happened; of people still glowing with the memory of to-morrow morning. A man in advance of the age is a familiar phrase enough. An age in advance of the age is really rather odd.

But when full allowance has been made for this harmless element of poetry and pretty human perversity in the thing, I shall not hesitate to maintain here that this cult of the future is not only a weakness but a cowardice of the age. It is the peculiar evil of this epoch that even its pugnacity is fundamentally frightened; and the Jingo is contemptible not because he is impudent, but because he is timid. The reason why modern armaments do not inflame the imagination like the arms and emblazonments of the Crusades is a reason quite apart from optical ugliness or beauty. Some battleships are as beautiful as the sea; and many Norman nose-pieces were as ugly as Norman noses. The atmospheric ugliness that surrounds our scientific war is an emanation from that evil panic which is at the heart of it. The charge of the Crusades was a charge; it was charging towards God, the wild consolation of the braver. The charge of the modern arma-

ments is not a charge at all. It is a rout, a retreat, a flight from the devil, who will catch the hindmost. It is impossible to imagine a mediæval knight talking of longer and longer French lances, with precisely the quivering employed about larger and larger German ships. The man who called the Blue Water School the "Blue Funk School" uttered a psychological truth which that school itself would scarcely essentially deny. Even the two-power standard, if it be a necessity, is in a sense a degrading necessity. Nothing has more alienated many magnanimous minds from Imperial enterprises than the fact that they are always exhibited as stealthy or sudden defenses against a world of cold rapacity and fear. The Boer War, for instance, was colored not so much by the creed that we were doing something right, as by the creed that Boers and Germans were probably doing something wrong; driving us (as it was said) to the sea. Mr. Chamberlain, I think, said that the war was a feather in his cap; and so it was: a white feather.

Now this same primary panic that I feel in our rush towards patriotic armaments I feel also in our rush towards future visions of society. The modern mind is forced towards the future by a certain sense of fatigue, not unmixed with terror, with which it regards the past. It is propelled towards the coming time; it is, in the exact words of the popular phrase, knocked into the middle of next week. And the goad which drives it on thus eagerly is not an affectation for futurity. Futurity does not exist, because it is still future. Rather it is a fear of the past; a fear not merely of the evil in the past, but of the good in the past also. The brain breaks down under the unbearable virtue of mankind. There have been so many flaming faiths that we cannot hold; so many harsh heroisms that we cannot imitate; so many great efforts of monumental building or of military glory which seem to us at once sublime and pathetic. The future is a refuge from the fierce competition of our forefathers. The older generation, not the younger, is knocking at our door. It is agreeable to escape, as Henley said, into the Street of By-and-Bye, where stands the



Hostelry of Never. It is pleasant play with children, especially unborn children. The future is a blank wall on which every man can write his own name as large as he likes; the past I find already covered with illegible scribbles, such as Plato, Isaiah, Shakespeare, Michael Angelo, Napoleon. I can make the future as narrow as myself; the past is obliged to be as broad and turbulent as humanity. And the upshot of this modern attitude is really this: that men invent new ideals because they dare not attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back.

Now in history there is no Revolution that is not a Restoration. Among the many things that leave me doubtful about the modern habit of fixing eyes on the future, none is stronger than this: that all the men in history who have really done anything with the future have had their eyes fixed upon the past. I need not mention the Renaissance, the very word proves my case. The originality of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare began with the digging up of old vases and manuscripts. The mildness of poets absolutely arose out of the mildness of antiquaries. So the great mediæval revival was a memory of the Roman Empire. So the Reformation looked back to the Bible and Bible times. So the modern Catholic movement has looked back to patristic times. But that modern movement which many would count the most anarchic of all is in this sense the most conservative of all. Never was the past more venerated by men than it was by the French Revolutionists. They invoked the little republics of antiquity with the complete confidence of one who invokes the gods. The Sansculottes believed (as their name might imply) in a return to simplicity. They believed most piously in a remote past; some might call it a mythical past. For some strange reason man must always thus plant his fruit trees in a graveyard. Man can only find life among the dead. Man is a misshapen monster, with his feet set forward and his face turned back. He can make the future luxuriant and gigantic, so long as he is thinking about the past. When he tries to think about the future itself, his mind

diminishes to a pin point with imbecility, which some call Nirvana. To-morrow is the Gorgon; a man must only see it mirrored in the shining shield of yesterday. If he sees it directly he is turned to stone. This has been the fate of all those who have really seen fate and futurity as clear and inevitable. The Calvinists, with their perfect creed of predestination, were turned to stone. The modern sociological scientists (with their excruciating Eugenics) are turned to stone. The only difference is that the Puritans make dignified, and the Eugenists somewhat amusing, statues.

But there is one feature in the past which more than all the rest defies and depresses the moderns and drives them towards this featureless future. I mean the presence in the past of huge ideals, unfulfilled and sometimes abandoned. The sight of these splendid failures is melancholy to a restless and rather morbid generation; and they maintain a strange silence about them—sometimes amounting to an unscrupulous silence. They keep them entirely out of their newspapers and almost entirely out of their history books. For example, they will often tell you (in their praises of the coming age) that we are moving on towards a United States of Europe. But they carefully omit to tell you that we are moving away from a United States of Europe; that such a thing existed literally in Roman and essentially in mediæval times. They never admit that the international hatreds (which they call barbaric) are really very recent, the mere breakdown of the ideal of the Holy Roman Empire. Or again, they will tell you that there is going to be a social revolution, a great rising of the poor against the rich; but they never rub it in that France made that magnificent attempt, unaided, and that we and all the world allowed it to be trampled out and forgotten. I say decisively that nothing is so marked in modern writing as the prediction of such ideals in the future combined with the ignoring of them in the past. Anyone can test this for himself. Read any thirty or forty pages of pamphlets advocating peace in Europe and see how many of them praise the old Popes or

Emperors for keeping the peace in Europe. Read any armful of essays and poems in praise of social democracy, and see how many of them praise the old Jacobins who created democracy and died for it. These colossal ruins are to the modern only enormous eyesores. He looks back along the valley of the past and sees a perspective of splendid but unfinished cities. They are unfinished, not always through enmity or accident, but often through fickleness, mental fatigue, and the lust for alien philosophies. We have not only left undone those things that we ought to have done, but we have even left undone those things that we wanted to do.

It is very currently suggested that the modern man is the heir of all the ages, that he has got the good out of these successive human experiments. I know not what to say in answer to this, except to ask the reader to look at the modern man, as I have just looked at the modern man—in the looking-glass. Is it really true that you and I are two starry towers built up of all the most towering visions of the past? Have we really fulfilled all the great historic ideals one after the other, from our naked ancestor who was brave enough to kill a mammoth with a stone knife, through the Greek citizen and the Christian saint to our own grandfather or great-grandfather, who may have been sabred by the Manchester Yeomanry or shot in the '48? Are you still strong enough to spear mammoths, but now tender enough to spare them? Does the cosmos contain any mammoth that we have either speared or spared? When we decline (in a marked manner) to fly the red flag and fire across a barricade like our grandfathers, are we really declining in deference to sociologists—or to soldiers? Have we indeed outstripped the warrior and passed the ascetical saint? I fear we only outstrip the warrior in the sense that we should probably run away from him. And if we have passed the saint, I fear we have passed him without bowing.

This is, first and foremost, what I mean by the narrowness of the new ideas, the limiting effect of the future. Our modern prophetic idealism is narrow because it has undergone a per-

sistent process of elimination. We must ask for new things because we are not allowed to ask for old things. The whole position is based on this idea that we have got all the good that can be got out of the ideas of the past. But we have not got all the good out of them, perhaps at this moment not any of the good out of them. And the need here is a need of complete freedom for restoration as well as revolution.

We often read nowadays of the valor or audacity with which some rebel attacks a hoary tyranny or an antiquated superstition. There is not really any courage at all in attacking hoary or antiquated things, any more than in offering to fight one's grandmother. The really courageous man is he who defies tyrannies young as the morning and superstitions fresh as the first flowers. The only true free-thinker is he whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past. He cares as little for what will be as for what has been; he cares only for what ought to be. And for my present purpose I specially insist on this abstract independence. If I am to discuss what is wrong, one of the first things that are wrong is this: the deep and silent modern assumption that past things have become impossible. There is one metaphor of which the moderns are very fond; they are always saying, "You can't put the clock back." The simple and obvious answer is "You can." A clock, being a piece of human construction, can be restored by the human finger to any figure or hour. In the same way society, being a piece of human construction, can be reconstructed upon any plan that has ever existed.

There is another proverb, "As you have made your bed, so you must lie on it"; which again is simply a lie. If I have made my bed uncomfortable, please God I will make it again. We could restore the Heptarchy or the stage coaches if we chose. It might take some time to do, and it might be very inadvisable to do it; but certainly it is not impossible as bringing back last Friday is impossible. This is, as I say, the first freedom that I claim: the freedom to restore. I claim a right to propose as a solution the

old patriarchal system of a Highland clan, if that should seem to eliminate the largest number of evils. It certainly would eliminate some evils; for instance, the unnatural sense of obeying cold and harsh strangers, mere bureaucrats and policemen. I claim the right to propose the complete independence of the small Greek or Italian towns, a sovereign city of Brixton or Brompton, if that seems the best way out of our troubles. It would be a way out of some of our troubles; we could not have in a small state, for instance, those enormous illusions about men or measures which are nourished by the great national or international newspapers. You could not persuade a city state that Mr. Beit was an Englishman, or Mr. Dillon a desperado, any more than you could persuade a Hampshire village that the village drunkard was a teetotaler or the village idiot a statesman. Nevertheless, I do not as a fact propose that the Browns and the Smiths should be collected under separate tartans. Nor do I even propose that Clapham should declare its independence. I merely declare my independence. I merely claim my choice of all the tools in the universe; and I shall not admit that any of them are blunted merely because they have been used.

#### PATRIOTISM AND SPORT

I NOTICE that some papers, especially papers that call themselves patriotic, have fallen into quite a panic over the fact that we have been twice beaten in the world of sport, that a Frenchman has beaten us at golf, and that Belgians have beaten us at rowing. I suppose that the incidents are important to any people who ever believed in the self-satisfied English legend on this subject. I suppose that there are men who vaguely believe that we could never be beaten by a Frenchman, despite the fact that we have often been beaten by Frenchmen, and once by a Frenchwoman. In the old pictures in *Punch* you will find a recurring piece of satire.

The English caricaturists always assumed that a Frenchman could not ride to hounds or enjoy English hunting. It did not seem to occur to them that all the people who founded English hunting were Frenchmen. All the Kings and nobles who originally rode to hounds spoke French. Large numbers of those Englishmen who still ride to hounds have French names. I suppose that the thing is important to any one who is ignorant of such evident matters as these. I suppose that if a man has ever believed that we English have some sacred and separate right to be athletic, such reverses do appear quite enormous and shocking. They feel as if, while the proper sun was rising in the east, some other and unexpected sun had begun to rise in the north-north-west by north. For the benefit, the moral and intellectual benefit of such people, it may be worth while to point out that the Anglo-Saxon has in these cases been defeated precisely by those competitors whom he has always regarded as being out of the running; by Latins, and by Latins of the most easy and un strenuous type; not only by Frenchmen, but by Belgians. All this, I say, is worth telling to any intelligent person who believes in the haughty theory of Anglo-Saxon superiority. But, then, no intelligent person does believe in the haughty theory of Anglo-Saxon superiority. No quite genuine Englishman ever did believe in it. And the genuine Englishman these defeats will in no respect dismay.

The genuine English patriot will know that the strength of England has never depended upon any of these things; that the glory of England has never had anything to do with them, except in the opinion of a large section of the rich and a loose section of the poor which copies the idleness of the rich. These people will, of course, think too much of our failure, just as they thought too much of our success. The typical Jingo who has admired their countrymen too much for being conquerors will, doubtless, despise their countrymen too much for being conquered. But the Englishman with any feeling for England will know that athletic failures do not prove that England is weak,

terrible beginning. It was surely by no accident that the spectacle which darkened the sun at noonday was set upon a hill. The martyrdoms of the early Christians were public not only by the caprice of the oppressor, but by the whole desire and conception of the victims.

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.

It is, I am inclined to think, a decadent and diseased purity which has inaugurated this notion that the sacred object must be hidden. The stars have never lost their sanctity, and they are more shameless and naked and numerous than advertisements of Pears' soap. It would be a strange world indeed if Nature was suddenly stricken with this ethereal shame, if the trees grew with their roots in the air and their load of leaves and blossoms underground, if the flowers closed at dawn and opened at sunset, if the sunflower turned towards the darkness, and the birds flew, like bats, by night.

#### A DEFENCE OF NONSENSE

THERE are two equal and eternal ways of looking at this twilight world of ours: we may see it as the twilight of evening or the twilight of morning; we may think of anything, down to a

fallen acorn, as a descendant or as an ancestor. There are times when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendour. But there are other times when everything seems primitive, when the ancient stars are only sparks blown from a boy's bonfire, when the whole earth seems so young and experimental that even the white hair of the aged, in the fine Biblical phrase, is like almond-trees that blossom, like the white hawthorn grown in May. That it is good for a man to realize that he is "the heir of all the ages" is pretty commonly admitted; it is a less popular but equally important point that it is good for him sometimes to realize that he is not only an ancestor, but an ancestor of primal antiquity; it is good for him to wonder whether he is not a hero, and to experience ennobling doubts as to whether he is not a solar myth.

The matters which most thoroughly evoke this sense of the abiding childhood of the world are those which are really fresh, abrupt and inventive in any age; and if we were asked what was the best proof of this adventurous youth in the nineteenth century we should say, with all respect to its portentous sciences and philosophies, that it was to be found in the rhymes of Mr. Edward Lear and in the literature of nonsense. "The Dong with the Luminous Nose," at least, is original, as the first ship and the first plough were original.

It is true in a certain sense that some of the greatest writers the world has seen—Aristophanes, Rabelais and Sterne—have written nonsense; but unless we are mistaken, it is in a widely different sense. The nonsense of these men was satiric—that is to say, symbolic; it was a kind of exuberant capering round a discovered truth. There is all the difference in the world between the instinct of satire, which, seeing in the Kaiser's moustaches something typical of him, draws them continually larger and larger; and the instinct of nonsense which, for no reason whatever, imagines what those moustaches would look like on the

present Archbishop of Canterbury if he grew them in a fit of absence of mind. We incline to think that no age except our own could have understood that the Quangle-Wangle meant absolutely nothing, and the Lands of the Jumbles were absolutely nowhere. We fancy that if the account of the knave's trial in "Alice in Wonderland" had been published in the seventeenth century it would have been bracketed with Bunyan's "Trial of Faithful" as a parody on the State prosecutions of the time. We fancy that if "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" had appeared in the same period every one would have called it a dull satire on Oliver Cromwell.

It is altogether advisedly that we quote chiefly from Mr. Lear's "Nonsense Rhymes." To our mind he is both chronologically and essentially the father of nonsense; we think him superior to Lewis Carroll. In one sense, indeed, Lewis Carroll has a great advantage. We know what Lewis Carroll was in daily life: he was a singularly serious and conventional don, universally respected, but very much of a pedant and something of a Philistine. Thus his strange double life in earth and in dreamland emphasizes the idea that lies at the back of nonsense—the idea of *escape*, of escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness, where apples grow on pear-trees, and any odd man you meet may have three legs. Lewis Carroll, living one life in which he would have thundered morally against any one who walked on the wrong plot of grass, and another life in which he would cheerfully call the sun green and the moon blue, was, by his very divided nature, his one foot on both worlds, a perfect type of the position of modern nonsense. His Wonderland is a country populated by insane mathematicians. We feel the whole is an escape into a world of masquerade; we feel that if we could pierce their disguises, we might discover that Humpty Dumpty and the March Hare were Professors and Doctors of Divinity enjoying a mental holiday. This sense of escape is certainly less emphatic in Edward Lear, because of the completeness of his citizenship in the world of un-

reason. We do not know his prosaic biography as we know Lewis Carroll's. We accept him as a purely fabulous figure, on his own description of himself:

"His body is perfectly spherical,  
He weareth a runcible hat."

While Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is purely intellectual, Lear introduces quite another element—the element of the poetical and even emotional. Carroll works by the pure reason, but this is not so strong a contrast; for, after all, mankind in the main has always regarded reason as a bit of a joke. Lear introduces his unmeaning words and his amorphous creatures not with the pomp of reason, but with the romantic prelude of rich hues and haunting rhythms.

"Far and few, far and few,  
Are the lands where the Jublies live,"

is an entirely different type of poetry to that exhibited in "Jabberwocky." Carroll, with a sense of mathematical neatness, makes his whole poem a mosaic of new and mysterious words. But Edward Lear, with more subtle and placid effrontery, is always introducing scraps of his own elvish dialect into the middle of simple and rational statements, until we are almost stunned into admitting that we know what they mean. There is a genial ring of common sense about such lines as,

"For his aunt Jobiska said 'Every one knows  
That a Pobble is better without his toes,'"

which is beyond the reach of Carroll. The poet seems so easy on the matter that we are almost driven to pretend that we see his meaning, that we know the peculiar difficulties of a Pobble, that we are as old travellers in the "Gromboolian Plain" as he is.

Our claim that nonsense is a new literature (we might almost say a new sense) would be quite indefensible if nonsense were nothing more than a mere æsthetic fancy. Nothing sublimely

artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason. There must always be a rich moral soil for any great æsthetic growth. The principle of *art for art's sake* is a very good principle if it means that there is a vital distinction between the earth and the tree that has its roots in the earth; but it is a very bad principle if it means that the tree could grow just as well with its roots in the air. 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. There is one attitude in which we think that all existence is summed up in the word "ghosts"; another, and somewhat better one, in which we think it is summed up in the words "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Even the vulgarest melodrama or detective story can be good if it expresses something of the delight in sinister possibilities—the healthy lust for darkness and terror which may come on us any night in walking down a dark lane. If, therefore, nonsense is really to be the literature of the future, it must have its own version of the Cosmos to offer; the world must not only be the tragic, romantic, and religious, it must be nonsensical also. And here we fancy that nonsense will, in a very unexpected way, come to the aid of the spiritual view of things. Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the "wonders" of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park keeper. Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense. Viewed from that other side, a bird is a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk, a man a quadruped begging on its hind legs, a house a gigantesque

hat to cover a man from the sun, a chair an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two.

This is the side of things which tends most truly to spiritual wonder. 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 picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it. "Hast Thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is?" This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense. Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. The well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that "faith is nonsense," does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith.

#### A DEFENCE OF USEFUL INFORMATION

It is natural and proper enough that the masses of explosive ammunition stored up in detective stories and the replete and solid sweet-stuff shops which are called sentimental novelettes should be popular with the ordinary customer. It is not difficult to realize that all of us, ignorant or cultivated, are primarily interested in murder and love-making. The really extraordinary thing is that the most appalling fictions are not actually so popular as that literature which deals with the most undisputed and depressing facts. Men are not apparently so interested in murder and love-making as they are in the number of different forms of