Chapter IV

The Chiaroscuro of Chesterton’s Art
An attempt will be made in this chapter to estimate the literary works of G.K. Chesterton, generally as an English man of letters with particular reference to his detective stories. This assessment will aim at determining his place in English literature mainly as a detective story writer and discussing the future of his reputation as the creator of Father Brown. It is well known that with the exception of a universally acclaimed few the fame of most writers - be they poets, dramatists, essayists or novelists - ebbs and flow depending on the tide of literary fashion current at any time among the most vocal and influential critics. An author whose books are best sellers of the decade fades out of literature amazingly quickly. Manuscripts which were rejected by knowledgeable publishers remained masterpieces for centuries. These tastes and fashions change with the change in the social and moral values which are ever in a flux, more so, in modern times than in the relatively conservative and slow moving past. The use of the word 'Victorian' pejoratively by the post-Victorians is the most notable example of change in
taste - social, moral and aesthetic - which includes the literary. So it would be inadvisable as well as inadmissible, to take seriously opinion which superciliously writes off some authors and praises some others to the skies. In fact all superlative evaluations must be treated guardedly, as excessively subjective.

As has been noticed earlier in Chapter II of this dissertation it is proper to consider G.K. Chesterton as an Edwardian. That age was remarkable for throwing up in a negative fashion a number of anti-Victorian trends evident in all arts and letters and even in political attitudes and economic values. A new kind of urge for liberation from the intellectual and the moral strains of Victorianism became apparent; and it generated reactions which while being one in so far as they were all adverse reactions to the nineteenth century were not agreed among themselves regarding their aesthetic and moral stands. They were in a hurry to express themselves as all liberators are; and the essay, the drama, criticism through the columns of the popular magazines, the platform and later the electronic medium were the most suitable means of communicating the newly emerging values to the 20th century readership. Among those who took advantage of the media in the first quarter of the century, almost all the Edwardians and Georgians could
be mentioned; but for the present purpose of the thesis H.G. Wells, G.B. Shaw and G.K. Chesterton are most relevant. They represented a triumvirate of literary talents which they harnessed to pressing social, political, economic, religious, artistic etc., purposes. Art definitely was not to be for art's sake only; it was also to serve ultimate social purposes. This was more evident in Shaw than in others and that was because of his Fabianism. Another distinguished Edwardian who used the cartoon as an idiom of social criticism was Max Beerbohm, a close associate of G.K. Chesterton.

Chesterton was influenced by Belloc to the extent of his religious convictions and opinions being patterned on that of the latter; he went so far as to consider those convictions basic to all his thoughts and feelings and he felt no compunction in putting across those opinions irrespective of the occasion; and this he did to such a degree as to invite the criticism that his literature was an excuse for propagating his faith; in sum, he laid himself open to the view that to him art was to be subordinated to or made to serve the purposes of faith. This is a serious charge and it cannot be said that he absolves himself completely or satisfactorily in that regard. Perhaps
given a chance he would have preferred to plead guilty to the charge than change his habit of qualifying his art by his religious views.

But the romanticism which affected writers like Chesterton in that age had changed world thought as a whole and in provoking, though not in shaping, that thought G.K. Chesterton played no small part. Shaw and Chesterton were perfect opposites but again in a sense they were complementary to each other. They stood for directly opposite values in every field of human interest. But they were such good men that they never allowed these differences to harm their personal relations. That however is not relevant to a public discussion of the merits of their ideological positions. But that age and the subsequent ages were becoming so decidedly radical that an orthodox, pious, conservative, unashamed advocate of the Middle Ages had no chance against radicalism. Though it is usual to consider the abilities of these writers as 'period talent', meaning that it was relevant to contemporary thought only, their influence is permanent and their literary achievements have not been transient. They survive and may be expected to do so in the future. This is because, viewed even merely as literary achievers they rank very high among the 20th century writers.
Chesterton was naturally endowed with a taste and talent for art. He could draw pictures and cartoons, compose limericks with astonishing ease, construct plots, write essays, think up funny arguments for defending impossible positions with consummate cleverness and write as fast as any publisher could print and publish; and then how naturally the witticisms and the paradoxes came! The complete absence of malevolence made even the most bitterly controversial of his writings innocuous. He was a very careless writer so far as accuracy of facts went. But accuracy does matter. It is equally true that he lacked the discipline needed to keep track of facts. Forgetfulness in personal life was a bother to those charged with looking after him; but when the habit infects his writing the readers have a right to complain and his reputation suffers. His very exuberance needs subjects worthy of that fancy. He resembles Dickens in that respect, but Dickens had the extra dimension of concern for the socially weak, and he directed his indignation against those who exploited them; but Chesterton tried to justify the status quo and refused to discuss certain matters which had already become controversial. To him the revelation of his religion was superior to common reason which he called 'human' contradistinguished from the
'Christian'. Then his writings naturally tended to become an apology for his religion. His defence of the Middle Ages had only a partial truth to support it; but to suggest that even the Spanish Inquisition was to be defended because Christianity learnt torture from the Orient, is to forfeit sympathy from the impartial. Thus one can see two aspects of Chesterton at play in his literary efforts. One is to push certain favourite albeit deservedly unpopular ideas relentlessly and the other is to place his undoubted literary artistry at its service. If discriminating readers still read Chesterton it is because the former could be tolerated, in view of the latter. The solid crust of literary art which encases the brittle and unsubstantial views he cherishes will survive when all that it conveys has been ruthlessly brushed aside by Father Time.

Since we are concerned more with his literary work than the validity of his social, religious etc., ideas, it must be said that his literary achievements were possible because "Invention, imagination and expression came to him naturally". Even when he was very

1) Dorothy Collins, A Centenary Appraisal. op.175 to 179.
young he had the wit to invent and the language to communicate stories. At the age of three it is said, he dictated to an aunt _The History of Kids_ and that the transcript was signed by his father. This shows that his literary instinct was inherent. "From 1900 to 1972 his writings were published almost unceasingly and a man who was born with a pen in his hand never ceased to wield it till it was taken away from him by nature".  

But Nature also put many opposites together and created a Chesterton out of them. He was poet and versifier, apologist and apostle, Zionist and anti-Smiter etc. So one is not surprised to learn that 'the mountain of a man had a mouse of a voice'. But B.B.C. wanted him passionately. This means that opposites, though they did not mingle well, did not deter his readers and hearers from continuing to fancy him. For his defects have always been forgiven in view of his towering virtues. It also means that he had a natural endowment of opposites provided by nature in his person and also a talent for paradox which permeates his writings. His mind put opposites together and saw its effect as no one else did. He stood ideas upside down and read new meanings in the new posture.

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2) _Ibid., p. 179_.

_Dorothy Collins, A Centenary Appraisal, p. 179_
It tickled the lazy mind and made it think. He perfected it into an art by sheer practice though it often came to him naturally too.

Chesterton tried many literary media for his thoughts: verse, the column in the journal, essay, dialogue, prose, novel as well as short story; it cannot be said that he succeeded equally eminently in all these efforts. He wrote verses rather than poetry; through his Ballad of the White Horse must be considered far above the average. He controverted rather than convinced; he looked at truth sideways rather than faced it and thereby made new aspects of truth known to his readers. As a biographer he was surer of his Dickens than his Browning for in the case of the former there was natural sympathy, in the case of the latter it was contrived defence. The only job he was obliged to do but still did exceedingly well was his detective fiction. This opinion is not likely to be questioned by any one except critics like Edmund Wilson whose objection to the genre seems to be more temperamental than reasoned. The immense quantity of his writings could be traced to his capacity to think quickly, compose rapidly and write fast and still require no correction. It did not matter what was wanted of him, he could give the material in record
time and none could have done better. This is how he came to write 'The Blue Cross'. His mind was such that he could simultaneously write one article by hand and dictate a completely different one to his secretary. As James Stephen says; "He would write you at a moment's notice the biography of anyone you ask for. He would throw off a couple of novels, in his spare time; he would write so many short stories, you couldn't count them..."3 Though there was no malevolence in his estimate of others he could be unjust to an extraordinary degree and this is most manifest when he speaks of Thomas Hardy as 'a village atheist'. It was, what he mistook for atheism which offended him. And he was more worried about it than pleased with the numerous virtues that responsible criticism has found in the creator of Tess.

That he wrote incessantly in the columns of the journal earned for him the wrong name of 'journalist'. The columns of the journal were only a physical medium for the expression of his views. His art did not suffer because it was expressed through the journal. It helped him keep in touch with the public mood. His

writing had the supreme merit of being extremely enjoyable because it was felicitously phrased and contained abundant unfamiliar comments on familiar things; but this enjoyment will be possible only if his mannerisms, carelessness and erroneous arguments are overlooked. Once this is done Chesterton becomes timeless.

Chesterton was a critic in addition to being a creative writer. Apart from his biographies, he wrote a history of the nineteenth century English Literature in which one comes across statements of great perception. But the critical faculty in him did not preclude absence of prejudice. We shall consider first his anti-Semitism.

Chesterton has expressed views derogatory of the Jews as a community; critics like P.J. Kavanagh try to defend his attitude by holding that it is not like the Nazi hatred of the Jews which was racial, and that G.K. Chesterton objected only to the Jews for the financial hold they have on the international money market. It is also stated that in his early days he

had actually supported the Jews quoting Lord Macaulay in his favour. These arguments do not help, because the following lines are revealing.

"I'am fond of Jews,
Jews are fond of money
Never mind of whose
I'am fond of use
Oh! but when they lose,
Damn it all. It is funny".

These lines could have been written by Antonio, the Merchant of Venice. It is almost certain that the growing interests in Roman Catholicism gave Chesterton the anti-Jewish slant. From the point of view of the Jews it would be immaterial whether the motivation for hating them is race or religion.

Chesterton had no sympathy with Oriental religious thought and practice. There is a significant passage in 'The Dagger with the Wings':

"I've scarcely ever met a criminal who philosophised at all, who didn't philosophise along those lines of Orientation and recurrence and re-incarnation and the wheel of destiny
and the serpent biting its own tail. I have found merely in practice that there is a curse on the servants of the serpent; on their belly shall they go and the dust shall they eat, and there was never blackguard or a profligate born who could not talk that sort of spirituality...".5

This is not merely Father Brown, it is G.K. Chesterton himself.

These prejudices can be overlooked but illogicalities must not be; e.g. In the Everlasting Man he says: "Imagination does not breed insanity but reason does. Poets do not go mad but chess players do". But it must be noted that Cowper the English poet was often off his head; and Charles Lamb, to a lesser degree and his sister to a greater, were subject to fits of insanity; there is no record to show any chess player going mad i.e., 'mad' due to playing chess. This is being funny without being true. This is not due to the prejudice of a deeply religious man, it merely indicates the habitual indifference of one who does not care to verify his own statements.

5) 'The Dagger with the Wings', Penguin Father Brown, p. 423.
Chesterton has a habit of using and understanding words in different meanings in the same context and treating this illogical practice as a sort of cleverness in argument. When he said, "why can't you put the clock back? You can do it", he purposely misunderstands the idiom; his famous witticism about "twenty million women who refused to be dictated to and who at once became stenographers" also confuses the 'dictation'. Again he would not agree that it is necessary for a man to lie in the bed he has made. "There is another proverb - as you have made your bed so you must lie in it, which again is simply a lie. If I have made my bed uncomfortable please God I will make it again" says he. If Chesterton is to be paid in his own coin one could say this is strange statement coming from a Roman Catholic who would not permit matrimonial divorce...for divorce, is essentially re-making one's bed. This kind of punning on words and paradox-spinning when cultivated beyond measure leads to the habit of illogical arguments; and these are not rare at all in Chesterton.

6) Frank Swinnerton, _Half Century_, p. 38.
Enthusiasm for a cause and exuberance in expression carry him away and cool critics remain disappointed. But the general reader is not usually a meticulous critic. There is enough in Chesterton to satisfy him by way of excellent narration in a style which is, especially, Chesterton.

The influence of Belloc on Chesterton is deplored by many who study this Edwardian writer. While one is displeased with the influence and the one making it, it may also be asked whether Chesterton himself was not largely responsible for allowing himself to be influenced and remaining under it lifelong. The influence consisted mainly in putting Roman Catholicism above every other value in life and judging all things under and beyond the sun by its theological standard. G.B. Shaw who coined the famous expression 'Chesterbelloc' evidently disapproved of the combination. But it is also true that Chesterton was the better half and luckily it is that half which promises to survive creditably.
This dissertation holds that there is good reason why of all the literature G.K. Chesterton has created, it is the bunch of 48 detective stories featuring Father Brown that is still widely read and immensely liked by the common readers all over the world. The robust common sense of this class of readers learns the truth more directly and readily, than the professional critic who is handicapped by a heritage of rigid theories of criticism.

Though Edmund Wilson might say he is not concerned about 'who killed Roger Ackroyd?' the reader regardless of who criticises Chesterton, goes on to read his Father Brown stories. Of all G.K. Chesterton's books those that have had their widest circulation have been the Father Brown stories.7 This phenomenon needs some explanation and discussion.

Chesterton is one of the two or three very successful writers of detective fiction, and

Father Brown perhaps the second most famous detective in literature. Dupin has only the distinction of being the first and Poirot that of being the hero in best sellers. The Thorndykes, the Peter Wimseys and Perry Masons really do not count, for as characters they do not stand out convincingly. Though the reputation of Father Brown depends superficially on his being an ever successful sleuth, it is really due to his personality; the principles, values, convictions, manners and other eccentricities which are the essential components of his personality mark him off from others. Chesterton took to writing detective fiction not out of any external compulsion but out of free and willing choice; for he had a liking for the genre and a natural aptitude for it. That is what made him write as early as 1901 in defence of it. There are enough indications in his Autobiography pointing to Chesterton's early morbidity, ideas about sin, confession, redemption etc., so that when he actually started writing detective fiction
he put these ideas also in. The Roman Catholic factor came in handy in view of the detective being a priest of that denomination. The sincerity of Chesterton's involvement in the theme becomes clear; hence the exuberance also. These were not stage-managed at all. This is one of the reasons why his detective fiction looks more genuine and natural than the rest of his writings in which paradoxes, witticisms and other literary tricks often have to compensate for want of authenticity and reasoning. It is frequently claimed that he wrote detective fiction to keep the pot boiling. It is true. They kept the journalistic pot boiling but that does not prove that the choice was not his or was not willingly made. To him, it was a moral question of wrong by the criminal being righted by the detective. Once crime is committed violation of justice has begun and this needs reversal. "When mystery begins, justice ends" said Burke. This must be restored.

He wrote quickly but not hurriedly. He

8) Quoted by Robin W.Winks in Modus Operandi, p. 105.
took a couple of hours to do a story in, while others might have wanted a week. Again that bespeaks only his immense potential to turn out enduring literature at moment's notice. His delight in controversies did not diminish the brightness of his writing; i.e., though he raised dust it was gold dust he raised.

Chesterton assessed himself. He said, "I have no feeling for immortality. I do not care for anything except to be in the present stress of life as it is. I would rather live now and die, from an artistic point of view than keep aloof and write things that will remain in the world a hundred years after my death... It so happens that I couldn't be immortal; but if I could, I shouldn't want to be". 9 This he wrote in 1905 but he lived for 30 years more and during that time he wrote enough to make him very nearly immortal, a high percentage of the credit going to Father Brown. He spoke about one's writings lasting for a hundred years after one's death. It is fifty five years since he passed away. He remains

9) G.K. Chesterton - Quoted in Half Century, p. xxiii.
important enough even now, not only to be read but to be discussed and assessed. But it must also be remembered that his own estimate of himself need not be correct. Modesty and pride are poor sources of criticism.

There is no dearth of critics who have taken a dim view of Chesterton's survival in the future as an important English man of letters. W.W. Robson says that

"Chesterton was at his best in essays and short stories and these are not taken seriously by English critics. Furthermore all his works are on the border line between literature and journalism. But this is also true of Swift and Samuel Johnson and yet they are in very good standing with critics".  

The critic has met his own point and that supports Chesterton; and as for his being an essayist one cannot forget that Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey,

were eminent essayists of the 19th century. And it is on that foundation their reputation stands. Even his style is faulted.

"The recurring anti-theses inlaid with paradox begin to resemble a mechanical pattern superimposed upon his thought and so limiting rather than expressing it. His paradoxes conspire against him by creating an effect which is itself a paradox - the paradox that his prose style is at once brilliant and tedious. It has many particular merits but its general fault is its lack of chiaroscuro; it shines with so strong light that the eyes become dazzled and the mind fatigued ... he not only hits the nail on the head; he goes on hammering in a frenzy of argumentative zeal, long after the nail is driven home".11

As for more than hitting the nail on its head, Chesterton must have been thinking of those skulls - and they are by no means a few - which need a

hammering even for comprehension. To critics like this Chesterton is bearable only when he is compared to Oscar Wilde, a readymade victim of many easy critics, "Compared with the brilliance and the frigid frivolity of Oscar Wilde, Mr. Chesterton's is rather the cosy brilliance of logs blazing on an open hearth. There is warmth as well as light".  

George Orwell was one of the frankest critics of Chesterton.

"Chesterton was a writer of considerable talent who chose to suppress his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda ... Chesterton's battle poems such as 'Lepanto' or 'The Ballad of St. Barbara' make 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' read like a pacifist tract".  

This criticism is true, for G.K. Chesterton thinks


13) George Orwell, *Half Century*, pp. 102, 103.
that either Roman Catholic faith is relevant to the whole of life or it is relevant to none of it. This being his position he cannot be expected to keep Roman Catholicism out of his writings. But he took a risk, for the propaganda does interfere with his art.

A crude and impolite reference was made to Chesterton's addiction to paradoxes by Dean Inge who described him as "that obese mountebank who crucifies truth downwards". This smacks of personal animosity and must be overlooked. But one could quote what a defender of Chesterton said in this context:

"The world is upside down. We are all upside down. We are all flies crawling on a ceiling and it is an everlasting mercy that we don't drop off..."  

A more serious criticism is from T.S. Eliot:

"Though G.K. Chesterton has a mind as full of ideas as a rabbit warren, I have yet to see

14) W.W. Robson, A Centenary Appraisal, p.72.
15) Ibid.
evidence that he thinks".\textsuperscript{16} (emphasis added).

P.N. Furbank says that this statement of Eliot has always remained a mystery.\textsuperscript{17} To be charitable to Eliot one can say that what he meant was that much of what G.K. Chesterton says is on the basis of what he believes and not on what he thinks; for thinking is a rational procedure and Chesterton's definition of reason is conditioned by faith.

It cannot be claimed that the quality of Chesterton's writing is uniform or that his work is not marred by uneven merit; this is certainly due to the varying mood of the author. In his last days perhaps his energy had reached the end of the tether. It is reported that "the last Father Brown story he was ever to write was turned down by a magazine editor as being too poor to publish - an indignity which G.K. Chesterton did not know about, for the letter of rejection arrived after he had died.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} T.S. Eliot quoted by P.N. Furbank in \textit{A Centenary Appraisal}, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Chesterton does not lack enthusiastic adulators. Patrick Braybrook writing in 1926 said that "G.K. Chesterton does occupy in contemporary literature a place that no one else does" and that "he is in a sense a Dickens of the 20th century. He is something more. He may even be a prophet". The exaggeration is evident. Chesterton was an optimist, not a prophet. H.G. Wells and Orwell could be called prophets, but not Chesterton who had only a wish about the future and no idea about it. Bullet says "He wears his jester's cap like a crown". Swinnerton regards Chesterton's work highly. "G.K.Chesterton hoped to the end that he was right and almost with his last breath announced that the true revolution was the counter revolution. But he lost pace with the times and will become a classic rather than an influence upon our days".

Chesterton's Father Brown stories are an epitome of his literary abilities. He combines in them the secular features of plot construction

20) G.Bullet, The Innocence of G.K.Chesterton.
and clever detection while the streak of religious propaganda is unmistakable almost everywhere. The language, style and characterization constitute the literary component which more than make up for any deficiencies in the first two features. The ingenuity of the plot and the dexterity of detection are of a high order and these are enough to ensure a permanent readership for the Father Brown stories. Father Brown is no mean companion of Sherlock Holmes and both will live as long as people read English books, but Chesterton will be sustained even more so by the excellence of his literary achievement, of creating Father Brown. But there can be one valid criticism of these stories, i.e., unlike as in the Sherlock Holmes stories, Chesterton's narrative is too literary for the subject matter. There is more ornamentation than the theme can bear; there is no parity between language narrating and events narrated. The specific gravity of his diction is so high that the ideas germane to the story get lost in the glamour of the style. The events themselves are disposed
of quickly and the narrative pauses for endless digressions. The parity between the language and the theme which is a great credit of the Sherlock Holmes stories is missing in Chesterton. It often looks as if the narrative itself is deemed more important than what is narrated.

If G.K. Chesterton's place in literature is to be judged he must be seen not only as a successful communicator through many media but also one who belongs to the highest category of achievers in a single genre namely detective fiction. He is to be judged without being compared and on his own premises. He satisfies and even thrills. The reader must be pleased with that. There would be always enough readers and some of them eminent to be dissatisfied with any writer on to-a-limited-extent-valid grounds. The virtues in the case of Chesterton exceed his drawbacks and these will sustain him in the future. Even in the larger context of the history of English literature Chesterton is to be considered a leader among essayists of the 20th century.
ranking with Lamb, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt and De Quincey of the 19th Century and Addison, Steele and Goldsmith of the 18th. Of course with the evolution of English literature from stage to stage the expression has changed; but the humour and style of the free-wheeling essay have been maintained. The abundance of ideas he has poured into every literary vessel and served to generations of readers is an index of his versatility. Change of literary fashion and popular tastes, which might mean improvement or degeneracy, can affect any author. Each age and period under the influence of the particular prevailing fashion may consider itself the ultimate in the art of criticism. But there is enough in Chesterton to survive the most hostile criticism for even that will have to take note of him. Colin Hurry writes in his 'premature epitaph' --

"Place on his hand the jewel, on his brow the diadem
Who in an age of miracles dared to believe them."
Chesterton companion
  His companions mourn.
Chesterton Crusader
  Leaves a cause forlorn
Chesterton the critic
  Pays no further heed.
Chesterton the poet
  Lives while men shall read.
Chesterton the dreamer
  If by sleep beguiled;
And there enters heaven
  Chesterton ... the child"