

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS MYSTERY: FATHER BROWN AND THE CASE OF G.K. CHESTERTON

THROUGHOUT his literary career, G.K. Chesterton was attracted by — and powerfully exploited — the very divergent modes of detective fiction and autobiographical narrative. He began ‘making a case’ for detective fiction in his first book of prose, *The Defendant* (1901). He established himself as a major practitioner of the genre with the first volume of Father Brown stories (1911), and he was still writing new Father Brown stories just months before his death in 1936. However, Chesterton first came to public notice in the early years of the twentieth century as a flamboyantly autobiographical essayist; as can also be said of George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, his public persona is one of his most remarkable literary creations. His masterwork *Orthodoxy* (1908) is, in his own words, a “slovenly autobiography” (13), and the last work he completed before his death was his *Autobiography*.

Chesterton’s range as a writer — his tendency to operate in disparate, even conventionally antithetical, literary modes — has confused literary critics since his own time. Literary criticism has been unsure what to make of Chesterton, who wrote everything from theology to nonsense poetry, from the heroic narrative poem to the newspaper article. Many of Chesterton’s contemporaries complained about his eclecticism and longed for him to settle on a particular genre or style or at least to recognize generic boundaries. T.S. Eliot, for instance, held that Chesterton’s tendency to blend and blur genres and disciplines marked him as an unprofessional and hopelessly Victorian writer.¹ Similarly, modern critics sympathetic to Chesterton have tended to construct a more specialized Chesterton, the Chesterton-who-should-have-been, emphasizing and elevating a chosen aspect of his oeuvre, and diminishing and dismissing the others. Broadly speaking, the two most prevalent of these Chestertons have been Chesterton-the-detective-story-writer and Chesterton-the-autobiographical-essayist.

In his authoritative scholarly biography of Chesterton, Ian Ker has taken this tendency to its logical (if extreme) conclusion. One of Chesterton’s most careful and self-consistent critics, Ker is a paradigmatic example of the critical tendency to reduce Chesterton to a more manageable size and scope. He lays out clear principles by which he will construct his Chesterton and never veers from them. As Chesterton’s literary biographer, Ker’s self-proclaimed task is to “establish

his [Chesterton's] rightful position as the successor of the great Victorian 'sages'" (xi). The Victorian sages — such as Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin — were masters of nonfiction prose who sought through rhetorical pyrotechnics both to critique their society and restore a unified meaning to the world. As their heir, Ker's Chesterton is inevitably Chesterton-the-autobiographical-essayist. A thorough and systematic thinker, Ker even constructs a Chesterton canon that corresponds with his definition of the author as a sage. "Chesterton's great literary works," he asserts, "are not the novels and poems but *Charles Dickens, Orthodoxy, The Victorian Age in Literature, St. Francis of Assisi, The Everlasting Man, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Autobiography*" (Ker viii). He particularly praises the *Autobiography*, which he considers to be Chesterton's most underrated work, and makes a compelling case that it possesses "a very real claim to the classic status enjoyed by the autobiographies of two of the great Victorian sages, Newman and Ruskin" (Ker 128).

Most readers of Chesterton would refrain from defining a Chesterton canon that excludes his most famous literary creation, Father Brown. But Ker is relentless in the application of his critical method: sages are high-culture masters of nonfiction prose; Chesterton is a sage; therefore, Chesterton must not really be a mystery writer. Ker omits Father Brown from his list of major works and, despite the occasional qualifier, consistently denigrates the literary value of Chesterton's detective fiction. For instance, he asserts that, although "they will no doubt continue to be the most popular of his writings," the Father Brown stories "are not among his major writings, and they can hardly be called his 'masterpiece' compared with his great non-fictional prose works" (Ker 290, cf. 282). He reasons that while Chesterton-the-sage should be considered a major author, Chesterton "the author of . . . the Father Brown stories" is "*naturally enough* . . . dismissed as a minor writer" (Ker viii, my emphasis). If the sage is to take his rightful place in English letters, the mystery writer must go.

Ker's attempt to separate the nonfiction prose Chesterton (of the *Autobiography*) from the murder mystery Chesterton (of the Father Brown stories) accidentally underscores how interconnected the variegated aspects of Chesterton's authorial project are. For Ker, the *Autobiography* is a consummate production of Chesterton-as-sage. But in his *Autobiography*, Chesterton not only emphasizes his identity as an author of detective fiction, he insists that the *Autobiography* should itself be read as a contribution to the detective fiction genre. He treats enigmatic events from the early part of his autobiography as clues that lead to the work's unforeseen but inevitable conclusion and observes

near the end of the volume that the story of his life “can only end as any detective story should end” (*Autobiography* 56, 330). Chesterton himself has anticipated and broken down the critical binary between Chesterton-the-autobiographical-essayist and Chesterton-the-mystery-writer. Autobiography is mystery, and the detective and the sage are one. In this essay, I will examine how and why Chesterton employs the tropes of detective fiction in his autobiography, and show that this stylistic decision is not merely incidental but required by his populist philosophy and model of authorship.

IN the second chapter of his *Autobiography* (“The Man with the Golden Key”), G.K. Chesterton admits that he could easily turn the present work into a prolonged essay: “Having littered the world with thousands of essays for a living, I am doubtless prone to let this story stray into a sort of essay” (*Autobiography* 55). For many critics, such as Ian Ker, Chesterton is primarily a master of the essay. But in the context of an autobiography, Chesterton considers his essayistic tendencies to be not a literary asset, but a literary problem. Although essayists typically have a strong persona, the essay is not principally a narrative genre. As Chesterton realizes, the essayistic turn toward rumination can thwart narrative progress or subvert the narrative mode altogether. And Chesterton insists that, above all else, an autobiography must be a narrative, a story: “I repeat that it [his autobiography] is not an essay but a story” (*Autobiography* 55-56).

To preserve the narrative nature of his autobiography, Chesterton draws on the narrative genre with which he is most familiar: detective fiction. His autobiography is “so much” a story, he explains, “that I am here employing a sort of device from a detective story” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 56). In the early chapters of any piece of detective fiction, the reader is placed into a physical setting (the crime scene) whose apparent meaning is not its ultimate meaning, and witnesses a series of events (the acts of the suspects) that are properly understood only when they are retrospectively reinterpreted at the end of the work. The setting of the second chapter of Chesterton’s *Autobiography* is the nursery, and the events are his earliest memories. These memories revolve especially around his elaborate toy theatre and the devoted and imaginative father who built it for him. His first, enigmatic memory is of a fairy tale performed in the toy theatre; he remembers only the fragmentary image of a cardboard king with a giant key crossing a bridge to a castle (*Autobiography* 39).

And, of course, every mystery must have its clues. Chesterton explicitly informs the reader that he will treat his nursery experiences — and the lessons he learned from them — as clues to the “murder or other mystery” that will comprise the plot of the rest of the volume (*Autobiography* 57). As he explains:

In the first few pages of a police novel, there are often three or four hints rather to rouse curiosity than allay it [. . . which are] exhibited in the beginning though not explained until the end. The patient reader may yet discover that these dark hints have something to do with the ensuing mystery of my misguided existence, and even with the crime [his conversion to Catholicism, which scandalized his contemporaries] that comes before the end. (*Autobiography* 56)

Our clues are as follows. First, the adult composing the autobiography will turn out to be somehow continuous with — even the “unfolding” of — the child playing in the nursery (*Autobiography* 56). Chesterton’s adult self is, in John Henry Newman’s technical language, “implicit” in the child self (*Autobiography* 56). Second, Chesterton’s seemingly trivial habit of playing or pretending — even with dolls or puppets — will prove to possess an unexpected, even revelatory significance. For “dolls are . . . in the true sense images. The very word images means things necessary to imagination,” and “imagination is almost the opposite of illusion” (*Autobiography* 56). Third, in this imaginative youth full of toy theatre, puppet plays, and legends, Chesterton insists, “I was more wide-awake than I am now, and moving in broader daylight”; the “real happenings” of the very public life he will narrate later “are far less real” (*Autobiography* 57, 58). Fourth, although the child Chesterton knew both pain and guilt, neither marred him as they would an adult; for the child understood that happiness and unhappiness were qualitatively different entities, marked by “a different texture or held on a different tenure” from each other (*Autobiography* 57).

Since Chesterton wishes us to experience his autobiography as a mystery, I will also for the moment leave the reader hanging as to the exact significance of these clues. Unlike other critics who have treated these observations as mere asides, I will take Chesterton at his word and treat these clues as central to the structure of the volume. The detective motif provides a narrative frame that organizes the opening and closing chapters of the autobiography; it serves a pivotal role in giving meaning and shape to his life. We encounter the clues in chapter two (“The Man with Golden Key”) and solve the mystery in the final chapter (“The God with the Golden Key”). And, as one would expect,

Father Brown will enter the story in the final chapter and play a role in solving the crime. If Ian Ker is right, and Chesterton's autobiography should be considered a work of sage discourse, it is one in which the sage and the detective are entwined.

The claim that in his autobiography Chesterton treats the (high, nonfictional) genre of the sage discourse and the (low, fictional) genre of the mystery story as fundamentally synonymous may seem counter-intuitive. But in a Chestertonian paradox, many seeming opposites meet and merge. To explain how Chesterton is able to synthesize these seemingly disparate genres, I must first briefly define them and then outline some relevant aspects of his philosophy. In *Elegant Jeremiahs*, George Landow provides the most concrete and useful definition of the Victorian sage and of sage discourse as a whole. The sage is a figure who, in a fragmented and rapidly changing culture marked by religious and philosophical skepticism, attempts to find new ways to perceive human life — and the universe itself — as a coherent and meaningful whole (Landow, *Elegant* 22-23, see also Holloway 11). The Victorian sage achieves this aim chiefly by functioning as a master interpreter, an omniscient understanding eye that can successfully read a world full of “mysteriously encoded” signs illegible to others (Landow, *Elegant* 45). In Carlyle's image, he is a Daniel, able to read the writing on the wall at our modern-day Belshazzar's feast (Landow, *Elegant* 44). In particular, the sage interprets “symbolical grotesques,” bizarre or horrific scenes that seem to defy the possibility of coherent meaning; by giving meaning even to the terrifying or absurd, the sage establishes the meaningful character of the world as a whole (Landow, *Elegant* 76). Famously, Carlyle vividly depicted and interpreted even the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution.

Since they distrust a reductive empiricism and scientism, offering instead holistic interpretations of reality that cannot be empirically verified, the sages rely on *ethos* more than *logos* as a means of persuasion (Landow, *Elegant* 152; “Aggressive” 39). Like the biblical prophets (who also traffic in the grotesque and rely heavily on *ethos*), the sage is authorized only by the force of his or her own character and message (Landow, *Elegant* 23, 52). This reliance on *ethos* makes self-narrative, autobiography, a particularly important literary mode for the sage. The sage is one who interprets the seemingly uninterpretable and thereby restores a unified meaning to a metaphysically-ruptured world.

Beginning with Chesterton himself, critics of detective fiction have described the genre in terms that resonate surprisingly with Landow's

definition of the sage discourse. Jon Thompson notes that the fundamental nature of the detective story is “hermeneutic; it explores what it means to be caught up in the mazes of modernity” (9). Chesterton concurs with this analysis, asserting that the value of the detective story is that it gives meaning to the apparently meaningless modern, urban world (“A Defense” 158-61). The influential critic Ronald Thomas describes the detective’s attempt to unravel the mazes of modernity in terms that resemble the sage’s search for ultimate meaning. By interpreting apparently illegible signs (or clues) the detective “explain[s] an event that seems inexplicable to everyone else”; at the end of the story, the detective’s hermeneutic victory restores both individual and communal identity (Thomas 2-3). Joseph Kestner and George Dove take the point further: over the course of the story, a detective shapes the random chaos of events into an “ordered universe”; thus, the genre reflects an intense “yearning for order” projected out to “the fantasy level” (Kestner 21, 20; Dove 35-36). Chesterton also associates detective fiction with a restoration of meaning to the universe. He asserts that the genre is akin to the apocalypse or “Day of Judgment,” when everything is unmasked and given a meaning (“The Ideal” 401-03). Chesterton can transform the sage into a detective (and vice-versa) because detective fiction as a genre does much of the same hermeneutic work as the sage discourse. In some important respects, the detective is a kind of fictive sage, and the detective story a kind of poor man’s sage discourse, a means of finding meaning and pattern in the chaos of modernity.

Chesterton’s philosophy commits him to both the populism of the mystery writer and the metaphysics of the sage. He was a philosophical populist, who held that the collective opinion of humanity is unlikely to be wrong (see, for instance, *George* 419). Hence, he believed in the value and validity of tradition, which he called “democracy extended through time,” “a consensus of common human voices” throughout the ages (*Orthodoxy* 47). His belief in the masses made him a prominent dissenter from the cult of the scientific expert that enthralled many early twentieth-century intellectuals. Chesterton held that the specialized methodology of the scientific expert results in a vision of the world that, even when factually accurate, is narrow and limited to the point of distortion. By contrast, the “common sense” of the mass of humanity provides a broader and more multi-faceted understanding of the world (*Orthodoxy* 22-23).² Even “popular errors” of fact generally bear witness to a larger metaphysical truth or “ultimate reality” (*Saint Thomas* 109). As a rule, Chesterton concludes, “only mankind itself can bear witness to the abstract first principles of

mankind, and in matters of theory I would always consult the mob” (*George* 482). Chesterton would have us consult the masses or mob even in matters of literary theory. For Chesterton, a literary work that fails to connect with the general reader is not boldly experimental, but, rather, rhetorically ineffective (“Middleman” 614, 618). By contrast, a “myth” or “legend” is a story that is popular with a wide readership over time. Legends have such staying power that they retain their vitality even when retold by other authors or recast into a different medium (*Charles* 88, 95). Chesterton holds that legends are not just literarily but also philosophically important. Each legend must reveal important truths about human nature (*Robert* 154); else, it would have not resonated with so many readers for so long. Contrary to common usage, legends are not merely imaginative distortions of reality, but, rather, possess epistemological value.

Though like the Victorian sages Chesterton rejects the reductive empiricism of the scientific expert, he does believe (again, like the sages) that the universe is rational and coherent and that its meaning is discernible. In an image Chesterton will often use, the world is a lock, and philosophies or religions are attempts at forging keys that will unlock it. Both locks and keys possess an irregular — even “in a sense arbitrary” — shape that could not be determined by the legitimate but abstract methods of deduction and induction (*Everlasting Man* 214-15). Yet, locks and keys are still subject to rational analysis and verification. Keys are falsifiable; insert them in a lock, and they will either click and turn, or they will not. For both the individual and humanity as a whole, the practical test of living will show whether a particular approach to truth — however unshapely it may seem — may unlock the door of the world (*Everlasting Man* 214-15).

Chesterton’s philosophy and fiction amplify the connection between the mystery story and the sage discourse. In his critical writings, Chesterton asserts that the most famous fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, is “the one great popular legend in the modern world” (“On Detective Novels” 2). The Holmes stories are perennially popular, and legitimately legendary, since they illuminate and transfigure the seemingly ugly and meaningless modern industrial city, giving it the beauty of poetry and the grandeur of the fairy tale (“A Defense” 158-61). Under Chesterton’s definition of the term, Father Brown can fairly be deemed a legend as well. Father Brown, “the second-most famous mystery solver in English literature,” has remained popular for over one hundred years, and his adventures have been retold many times in many different media, including multiple movies and radio and television series (Gardiner 1).

Father Brown is something of a counter-myth to Holmes. Although a persuasive case can be made that Holmes is an imaginative and even intuitive thinker,³ he is most explicitly (and most popularly) the perfect embodiment of scientific empiricism. Father Brown is a sage whose methods underscore the limitations of the scientific detective. In the Father Brown stories, the scientific detective (or “eminent criminologist”) is always ultimately wrong and the technologies of detection (such as the lie detector) inadvertently deceive (see *Penguin Complete* 171, 221, 231). Here, scientific detection misleads because it objectifies people, causing the detective to interpret his or her findings in an excessively limited and restrictive manner (see *Penguin Complete* 465). By contrast, Father Brown uses his broad knowledge of human nature and the masses as they actually are to discern who psychologically must have committed the crime. Through this more holistic method (derived from the confessional), he restores both an ordered society and a coherent world. Samuel Hynes nicely describes the work Chesterton’s detective performs as a sage: “Father Brown’s role is not to solve crimes, exactly; it is, rather, to find the center of the maze, and thus to demonstrate that it has a center, that the world *has* moral meaning” (41).

Chesterton’s treatment of the sage autobiography and the detective story as synonymous comes to its logical conclusion in the later Father Brown Stories (1926-1935) and the *Autobiography* (1936). As I have outlined above, Father Brown functions as something of a sage throughout the series. This role becomes increasingly explicit in the later Father Brown stories, however. Father Brown now exposes not merely criminals, but the defects of contemporary epistemology and economics.⁴ In “The Insoluble Problem,” the last of these stories published in Chesterton’s lifetime, the narrator openly equates Father Brown’s intellectual ability to solve particular mysteries with the Church’s metaphysical ability to solve “the black enigma of the universe” (*Penguin Complete* 704). The authority to interpret the world that the present age ascribes only to “the Capitalist expert” has now returned to the priest (*Penguin Complete* 447).⁵

As early as “The Resurrection of Father Brown” (1926), Father Brown is also forced to deal with his public image and how his story will be narrated by others. He becomes concerned, like the sage, with his ethos and faces the difficulties of the literary autobiographer. In “The Resurrection,” the American journalist Paul Snaith, desperately looking for copy, discovers Father Brown performing missionary work

in South America. Thanks to Snaith, stories about Father Brown are printed in “the gigantic Sunday papers of the United States” and “a series of stories” about his acts of detection are published in magazines as well (*Penguin Complete* 322). Father Brown becomes for the first time a public figure like Chesterton himself, and even, like Chesterton, “received handsome and eager offers to go on a lecturing tour in the States” (unlike Chesterton, he declined) (*Penguin Complete* 322).

Father Brown experiences his popularity as a rhetorical problem. Any public figure becomes, to some degree, public property and experiences a loss of control over his or her own life and self-narrative. Father Brown’s public stature becomes a recurring issue in the final volumes of the series. In “The Secret of Father Brown” (1927), Father Brown must endure the invasive “interviewing” to which all Americans subject anyone whom they consider “a celebrity” (*Penguin Complete* 462). “The Scandal of Father Brown” (1935) confronts us with the spectral image of “two Father Browns” — one created by the Catholic press and the other by the anti-Catholic press — who “chase each other around the world forever,” and neither of whom “is very much like the real Father Brown” (*Penguin Complete* 603). Still, Father Brown’s first encounter with fame remains Chesterton’s most vivid depiction of its problems. In “The Resurrection of Father Brown,” the newly famous priest finds himself “assaulted” by some sham assailants, drugged into a semi-comatose state, proclaimed to be dead, placed in an open coffin, then paraded through the streets by a mourning mob. He wakes up, alive, at his own funeral. The conspirators’ plan is that the journalist Snaith will first hail Father Brown’s seeming reanimation as a miracle, selling millions of American newspapers, and then expose the miracle as a fraud and debunk it, selling even more papers. Father Brown thwarts the plot by, instead of accepting adulation as a saint, debunking the story himself immediately upon staggering out of his coffin (*Penguin Complete* 329, 331).

In this story, Father Brown is faced with the most disturbing aspects of losing control of one’s self-narrative. One aim of the conspiracy is to use Father Brown’s life to discredit his ideas. The sage’s reliance on ethos makes his claims particularly vulnerable to ad hominem attack, and Father Brown, framed as a counterfeiter of the miraculous, is to experience “disgrace” (*Penguin Complete* 331). Father Brown’s disgrace is designed to discredit both the Catholic Church and the miraculous in general. As Father Brown exclaims after thwarting the conspiracy, “[I]f it had only been my disgrace! But it was the disgrace of all I stand for; the disgrace of the Faith that they went about to encompass” (*Penguin Complete* 331). The second aim of the conspiracy

is more chillingly impersonal. As the subject of others' stories, one is objectified and exploited for the purpose of selling books, magazines, and newspapers. Father Brown reflects that had the conspirators succeeded, they "certainly would have got quite a lot of good copy out of me" (*Penguin Complete* 332). In this story, Father Brown regains control of his life narrative only by paradoxically solving the mystery of his own death, which is to say, by posthumously interpreting the meaning of his own existence — a feat Chesterton will later perform in his own autobiography.

As the detective Father Brown reaches his terminus, he is increasingly invested with the qualities of the sage and the literary autobiographer. Conversely, as the sage Chesterton reaches the terminus of his autobiography, he is increasingly dressed in the trappings of detective fiction. Remarkably, the philosophically central final chapter of the *Autobiography* — which contains Chesterton's exposition of his mature religious philosophy — begins with a discussion of detective fiction. Chesterton opens the chapter with an account of the "at least fifty-three" murders he has "committed," including a darkly comic list of ways he has disposed of the bodies (*Autobiography* 312). He proceeds from these droll remarks to an analysis of his literary identity. He flippantly dismisses his more serious imaginative work, claiming, "I have never taken my novels or short stories seriously, or imagined that I had any particular status in anything so serious as a novel" (*Autobiography* 313). The literary status he will claim for himself is that of a prominent author of detective fiction.⁶ His "name" has "achieved a certain notoriety as that of a writer of . . . detective stories" and publishers are still in the habit of "ordering a new batch of corpses" from him, "generally in consignments of eight at a time" (*Autobiography* 312).

In this context, Father Brown makes his first appearance in Chesterton's *Autobiography*. Chesterton suspects many people "know that a large number of my crime stories were concerned with a person called Father Brown" (*Autobiography* 313). Chesterton has insisted in the opening chapters of his autobiography that the present work is a mystery, and now, in the final chapter, the detective enters to solve it. He observes that "it has generally been said that Father Brown had an original in real life," and he informs the reader that Father Brown did have an "intellectual inspiration" in "Father John O'Connor," who was also the "intellectual inspiration . . . of much more important things": Chesterton's Catholic convictions (*Autobiography* 313-14).

For Chesterton, describing his detective fiction, telling his life story, and expositing his philosophy as a sage are fundamentally the

same action. He asserts that if he wishes to explain his religious convictions, he “cannot do better than tell the story of how the first notion of this detective comedy came into [his] mind” (*Autobiography* 314). The story of Father Brown’s origin is as follows: Chesterton runs into Father O’Connor at the house of a mutual acquaintance, and then goes out for a stroll with him. In the course of this walk, Chesterton expresses to Father O’Connor his position on a social issue connected with “vice and crime” (*Autobiography* 317). Father O’Connor finds Chesterton flatly “in error, or rather in ignorance” “on this particular point,” and Chesterton can only confess, “indeed I was” (*Autobiography* 317). Father O’Connor knows the truth because his experience hearing confessions has caused him to be acquainted with deeper moral and intellectual “abysses” than Chesterton could “imagin[e]” (*Autobiography* 317). If the sage’s authority comes in part from his ability to face and give meaning to the horrific and the grotesque, Father O’Connor possesses the authority of the sage to a greater degree than Chesterton himself. Chesterton contrasts Father O’Connor with two young “Cambridge undergraduates” also staying at the house, who fancy that they are men of the world and that the priest is “innocent and ignorant”; actually, “these two Cambridge gentlemen . . . knew about as much of real evil as two babies in the same perambulator” (*Autobiography* 318).

Chesterton takes two conclusions away from the event, both crucial in his life-narrative. First, the experience inspires in Chesterton the idea of “constructing a comedy in which a priest should appear to know nothing and in fact know more about crime than all the criminals”; it leads him to “disguis[e] Father O’Connor as Father Brown” (*Autobiography* 318). The incident also strikes Chesterton in a more personal and “much more serious” way (*Autobiography* 319). It makes him suspect that his own personal and intellectual difficulties can be truly resolved only by the Catholic Church (*Autobiography* 319). The Catholic Church understands human nature — both its good and its evil — more fully than Chesterton himself does, and is a more reliable guide to interpreting reality (*Autobiography* 319). This realization ultimately leads to his reception into and his submission to the authority of the Catholic Church, making his General Confession to none other than Father O’Connor (*Autobiography* 316). Both sage and detective, the Catholic Church (in the guise of Father O’Connor) has begun to solve the mystery of G.K. Chesterton.

Fittingly, at this exact point in the narrative, Chesterton cues the reader that he will now return to the narrative frame of the detective story that he established in his autobiography’s opening chapters. His

thoughts now turn “sharply back to those visions or fancies with which [he] ha[s] dealt in the chapter about childhood,” and he begins to interpret the clues which have been left unresolved throughout the narrative (*Autobiography* 319). First, clue number four: the reason why guilt does not mar children is that they intuit that absolution is possible; the sacrament of penance confers objective validity upon the child’s sense of forgiveness and restoration, and extends it to the adult (*Autobiography* 319). Next, clue number three: Chesterton’s sense that “those first years of innocence” spent in “the strange daylight of childhood” are more real than any period of his adult life turns out to be literally true (*Autobiography* 319), for innocence is more fundamental than guilt and experience. The Catholic who has just been to Confession, his innocence restored, “step[s] out again into that dawn of his own beginning. . . . He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has really remade him in His own image. . . . He stands . . . in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man” (*Autobiography* 319-20). For the interpretation of the final two clues, we will have to wait until the book’s final paragraph. This autobiography has been, as Chesterton again insists, “very much of a mystery-story” (329), and like any good mystery writer, he will withhold his final revelation to the last possible moment.

As the *Autobiography* becomes most fully a mystery story, it also becomes most fully a work of sage discourse. Chesterton’s autobiography has alluded to his beliefs throughout, but until the final chapter he has refrained from detailing his mature world view. Yet once Father Brown — in the person of his alter-ego Father O’Connor — converts Chesterton, the *Autobiography* almost immediately abandons the narrative mode and becomes a work of philosophy. In the last pages, the book finally asserts some of Chesterton’s central ideological claims: namely, that the Catholic Church’s doctrines alone can offer a convincing and coherent defense of the necessity of social justice, the goodness of the material world, and the existence of Gilbert Chesterton (*Autobiography* 320, 330). John Henry Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* similarly changes in its last chapter from a narrative of the author’s life into a philosophical interpretation of existence itself. If Ian Ker is right and Chesterton’s *Autobiography* deserves to be classed with Newman’s *Apologia* as a sage autobiography, it is the final chapter which most clearly justifies this assertion.

But Chesterton’s *Autobiography* attains this lofty dénouement only through the lowly devices of detective fiction. Chesterton makes this

stylistic point in the *Autobiography*'s final paragraph, which deserves to be quoted in full:

This story, therefore, can only end as any detective story should end, with its own particular questions answered and its primary problem solved. Thousands of totally different stories, with totally different problems have ended in the same place with their problems solved. But for me my end is my beginning, as Maurice Baring quoted of Mary Stuart, and this overwhelming conviction that there is one key which can unlock all doors brings back to me the first glimpse of the glorious gift of the senses; and the sensational experience of sensation. And there starts up again before me, standing sharp and clear in shape as of old, the figure of a man who crosses a bridge and carries a key; as I saw him when I first looked into fairyland through the window of my father's peep-show. But I know that he who is called the Pontifex, the Builder of the Bridge, is called the Claviger, or bearer of the Key; and that such keys were given to bind and loose when he was a poor fisher in a far province, beside a small and almost secret sea. (330-31)

Here Chesterton exercises the full interpretive authority of the sage or detective, confidently proclaiming the meaning of his self and world. Employing a common Chestertonian metaphor for faith, he declares that he now has seen the key that unlocks the world and forces an often baffling or incomprehensible existence to yield its meaning. The figure of the key also takes him back to his earliest memories; the riddles of self and world are connected. His first memory — the toy-theatre fairy tale of a man on a bridge with a key — also constitutes his first encounter with legend, his first contact with the traditional narratives that give human life shape and meaning. This archetypal fairy tale hero unconsciously prefigures the Catholic pontiff, etymologically “the builder of the bridge” and by tradition “the Keeper of the Key.” We now have the interpretation of our mystery's first two clues. The insights of Catholic doctrine permit Chesterton to see his life as continuous from beginning to end — his “end” is his “beginning” — and validate the insights of his imagination. There is a man dressed in the elaborate robes of a pageant or a play, who crosses a bridge and keeps the keys; ritual is reality, and legends are true. The *Autobiography* has ended “as any detective story should end,” and in fact exactly as Chesterton's last volume of detective stories does end. Just as in “The Insoluble Problem,” where there is one answer to the “black enigma of the universe,” in the *Autobiography* there is one solution to the enigma of the self: the Catholic faith (*Penguin Complete* 704).

As IAN Ker and others have asserted, G.K. Chesterton deserves the status of a major author. He is one of the central literary figures of his literary epoch, the Edwardian era. His work has influenced important writers ranging from J.R.R. Tolkien to Jorge Borges, and important thinkers ranging from Marshall McLuhan to Slavoj Žižek. Our definition of the major author is not usually applied to Chesterton because it ultimately derives from the literary strictures of modernism. Briefly put, for the modernists, the major author is known by both consistency and innovation; a major author is one who produces a coherent and carefully defined body of work that challenges commonly accepted cultural and literary standards. This very avant-garde, high culture vision of the artist is embodied in Ezra Pound's dictum that the artist must "Make it new," and in T.S. Eliot's attempt to control and define his literary corpus, leaving behind only a single, thin volume as the authorized *Collected Poems*. The more serious critical attempts to assert Chesterton's status as a major author edit G.K.C. to fit these modernist standards. Again, because of his consistency and clarity, Ker is the best case study. Ker's Chesterton is the author of a small body of major works (seven in total), all of which fall into the literary genre of nonfiction prose, and all of which possess some claim to high culture status in that they continue the sage discourse of Arnold, Carlyle, and Newman.

But Chesterton's literary project constitutes a rejection of the standards by which modern (and modernist) criticism would judge him. As he himself observes, his "legitimate liking for direct democratic appeal" prevents him from being "a real literary man" as the term is conventionally defined (*Autobiography* 277). He is a populist who adamantly refuses to acknowledge the high and low culture divide, both a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature and the President of the Detection Club, and he has exemplified this position in his literary output. His most influential and popular works are the nonfiction pieces of sage writing that Ian Ker defends — and the Father Brown detective stories. To omit Father Brown — the one perennially popular, perpetually retold "legend" Chesterton created — from the Chesterton canon is to refuse the challenge that G.K.C. poses to our critical assumptions.

A literary autobiography provides an author with the consummate opportunity to define himself and his authorial project. Chesterton uses his autobiography to highlight the challenges he poses to our concept of literary authorship. As I have shown, Chesterton bases the structure of his autobiography on the reversal or erasure of the high/low culture binary; it is a work of sage discourse that takes its narrative frame from mystery stories. He dissolves the high/low culture binary

for important political and philosophical reasons: he wishes to suggest the possibility of a restored cultural and personal unity. The *Autobiography* concludes with a dizzying vision of unity. In the work's final paragraph, Chesterton affirms — and to some extent equates — *all* the cultural practices by which we find meaning in the world around us. Here, no clear line divides the detective story from the fairy tale, the fairy tale from autobiography, autobiography from legend, legend from sage discourse. The critic is free to reject this genre-blurring vision of cultural unity — and the rambling, eclectic model of authorship it implies — but to reject it is to refuse Chesterton's authorial project. Perhaps the interests of criticism would be better served if instead of critiquing Chesterton in light of our assumptions about literary authorship, we reexamined our assumptions about literary authorship in light of Chesterton.

NOTES

1 See particularly Eliot's discussion of Chesterton in the essay "Professional, Or . . ." (61).

2 Chesterton also objects to the scientific expert on political grounds, as scientific research tends to reinforce the beliefs and values of the power elite that funds it. The "chief use of modern science," as Chesterton sees it, is to "provide long words to cover the errors of the rich" ("Celts" 133).

3 For a persuasive case that Holmes is not the mere empiricist and logician that he sometimes claims to be in Conan Dolye's stories, see *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*. In this volume, David Baggett's analysis of Holmes's methodological reliance on both imagination and abduction (12, 19) and Massimo Pigliucci's discussion of Holmes's similar dependence on probability and intuition (51, 58) are particularly insightful.

4 On epistemology see, for instance, Chesterton's observation in "The Oracle of the Dog" that "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are" (*Penguin Complete* 368). On economics, see, for instance, his Distributist attack on "the great movement towards monopoly or the turning of all trades into trusts" in "The Ghost of Gideon Wise" (*Penguin Complete* 458).

5 Early in the story "The Ghost of Gideon Wise," the Communist conspirator John Elias observes that, "Priests belonged, as Marx has shown, to the feudal stage of economic development. . . . The part once played by the priest is now played by the capitalist expert" (*Penguin Complete* 447). In the course of the story, however, the scientific investigator "Mr. Nares" fails properly to identify the criminal and Father Brown succeeds, exactly reversing Elias's observation.

RENASCENCE

6 Elsewhere in the *Autobiography*, Chesterton also identifies himself as a journalist, which also accords with his preference for popular genres over high literature (for example, 276).

WORKS CITED

- Chesterton, G.K. *Autobiography*. 1936. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1988.
- . “Celts and Celtophiles.” *Collected Works*. Ed. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 1: *Heretics, Orthodoxy, and the Blatchford Controversies*. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1989.
- . *Charles Dickens. Collected Works*. Eds. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 15: *Chesterton on Dickens*. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1989. 39-210.
- . “A Defense of Detective Stories.” *The Defendant*. London: J. M. Dent, 1932. 155-62.
- . *The Everlasting Man*. 1925. New York: Image Books, 1955.
- . *George Bernard Shaw. Collected Works*. Ed. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 11: *Plays and Chesterton on Shaw*. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1989. 363-488.
- . “The Ideal Detective Story.” *Collected Works*. Ed. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 35: *The Illustrated London News*. 1929-31. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1991. 400-03.
- . “The Middleman in Poetry.” *Collected Works*. Ed. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 21. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1990. 612-18.
- . “On Detective Novels.” *Generally Speaking*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1928. 1-7.
- . *Orthodoxy*. 1908. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- . *The Penguin Complete Father Brown*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981.
- . *Robert Louis Stevenson. Collected Works*. Ed. George Marlin, Richard Rabatin, and John Swan. Vol. 28: *Carlyle, Tolstoy, Stevenson and Chaucer*. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1991. 39-148.
- . *Saint Thomas Aquinas*. 1933. New York: Image Books, 1956.
- Dove, George. “The Detection Formula and the Act of Reading.” *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*. Macomb, Illinois: Essays in Literature, 1990. 25-37.
- Eliot, T.S. “Professional, Or . . .” Rev. of *The Stucco House* by Gilbert Canan and *Hearts of Controversy* by Alice Meynell. *The Egoist V* (April 1918): 61.
- Gardiner, Martin. Introduction. *The Annotated Innocence of Father Brown*. Ed. Martin Gardiner. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. 1-14.
- Hollway, John. *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*. 1953. New York: W. W. Norton, 1965.
- Hynes, Samuel. “A Detective and His God.” *The New Republic* 6 Feb. 1984: 39-42.
- Ker, Ian. *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Kestner, Joseph. *The Edwardian Detective: 1901-1915*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000.
- Landow, George. “Aggressive (Re)Interpretations of the Female Sage: Florence Nightingale’s Cassandra.” *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*. Ed. Thais Morgan. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1990. 32-45.
- . *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986

HEADY

- Tallon, Philip and David Baggett, eds. *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2012.
- Thomas, Ronald. *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Thompson, Jon. *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernism and Postmodernism*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993.

Copyright of Renaissance is the property of Marquette University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.