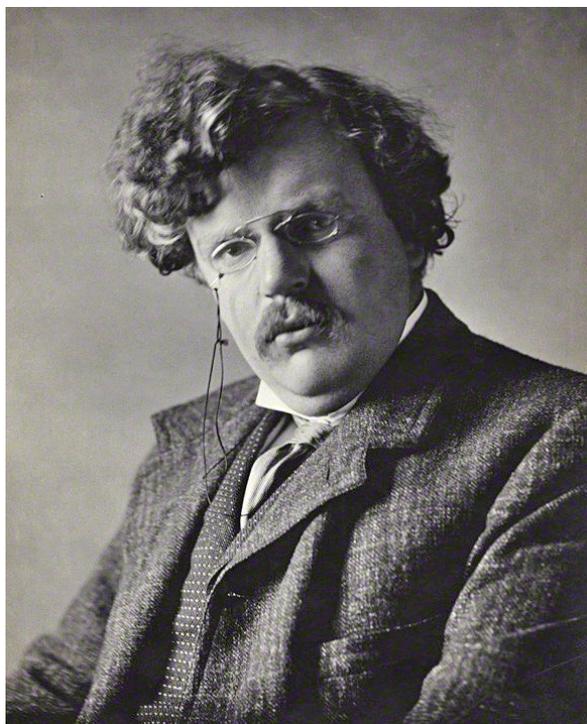


THE COLLECTED POEMS OF
G. K. CHESTERTON

This review of The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (London, 1927: Cecil Palmer) appeared without attribution in the magazine of St Paul's School, London, in February 1928: Pauline 46 no. 306 (February 1928), 13–15. The attribution to Berlin was made with great assurance and plausibility by the late Alden Miller, a master at the school at the time, in correspondence with Henry Hardy in 1980–1. IB said he had no recollection of writing the review. The quotations are to be found on pp. 138, 185, 36, 22–3.



G. K. Chesterton, by Ernest Herbert ('E. H.') Mills, 1909
© National Portrait Gallery, London

MR CHESTERTON is essentially a hunter of heresies: we know of no other man of letters who takes such loud and fierce delight in scenting out, and mocking at, and finally smashing all heretics, in Art as well as Life; and we suspect that this crusading zeal springs as much from an instinctive love of this merry medieval sport as from any moral indignation. And this is why his *Satires* (and they are far and away the best of all his poems) are such a pure delight. There is nothing in them of the spleen and rancour which made Juvenal, for instance, hideous for all time. His malice – for Mr Chesterton is not always wise, nor kindly – is bellowed at you with such a wealth of verbal gesture, amid such gusto and roars of Rabelaisian laughter, that there is nothing for it but to down your critic's weapons, forget your craft, abandon Reason, and capitulate. One would be surprised to see discipline, even poetic discipline, in the work of this volcanic poet; and Mr Chesterton's constant devotion to the memory of what was essentially the age of discipline, discipline both corporate and individual, coupled with his constant vociferating against Orientalism in a style which is sometimes itself aflame with more than Oriental splendour, provides us with a magnificent paradox, and one of which Mr Chesterton may justly be proud.

But that by the way. What in fact we do find is that bare minimum of pattern and form which divides true poetry from prose; for one thing we can confidently assert: Mr Chesterton never, in any circumstances or condition whatsoever, writes prose when he means to write verse; at his loudest he is still a poet among poets, and, what is far more, unmistakably a major poet. This major quality, the heroic conception of things, the sense of the bigness of the issues, is never absent. Not but that his ambition is often greater than his talent; but his failure is not like the failure of others. Take 'St Barbara', for instance. This wild, confused, livid battlepiece fails again and again: fails in its rhetorical and emotional and artistic efforts; is full of unachieved climaxes, of terrific beginnings which collapse because there is nothing to follow, of scattered fragments strewn about promiscuously as so much debris, of vast, titanic lines which degenerate into mere noise. His ambition far transcends his power, and yet one hesitates to deny greatness to the poem: for his failures are achieved on a level infinitely higher than [14] are other men's successes; in his very fall

there is something gigantic; the consciousness of magnificent effort lingers around it always.

In his best and highest poetry (though even there he shocks timid souls, for he is terribly at ease in Zion), in 'Lepanto', he reaches an intensity and an exaltation before his great, flaming vision of beauty, which conjure up memories of Crashaw and Blake and Francis Thompson. Let us not deceive ourselves: Mr Chesterton is not an inspired prophet, he has no constant vision of beauty before his eyes, he is naturally far removed from Milton and Blake and Thompson; but once it was given him to catch a glimpse, to preserve a reflection, of their sacred fire. But we repeat that Mr Chesterton is at his greatest – and how much that means, Mr Humbert Wolfe has told us more than once – as a writer of satires and burlesques; in that field he has no serious rivals either among his contemporaries or anywhere in the last two hundred years. No one, after he has read it, can forget the famous and smashing

Are they clinging to their crosses,
F. E. Smith [...]?

Or the delicious

They haven't got no noses,
They haven't got no noses,
And goodness only knowses
The Noselessness of Man.

'The Song of Quoodle'

Or the verses dedicated 'To a Modern Poet':

I cannot say
I ever noticed that the pillar-box
was like a baby
skinned alive and screaming.
I have not
a Poet's
Eye
which can see Beauty
everywhere.

Or 'Race-Memory', with its wistful

I am too fat to climb a tree,
There are no trees to climb [...]

And its sudden depth and sincerity:

The past was bestial ignorance:
But I feel a little funky,
To think I'm further off from heaven
Than when I was a monkey.

He has written scores of poems on this level, though some few of them, it is true, are marred by an excessive bitterness; but then he has been all his life tilting at what seemed prosperous heresies, and even if they all looked like so many windmills to us, who could find anger in his heart against this [15] knight whose soul is the soul of Don Quixote, with a body so unmistakably Sancho's? Nature (or is it the Aristophanes of Heaven?) has achieved in him one of her monumental pieces of irony. We leave the reader to meditate upon it.

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust* 2017

Posted 19 July 2017