The Hidden Face of Christ: Chesterton and the Concealment of (Divine) Mirth

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Presented at *Philosophical Theologies In South Africa: Texts, Traditions, And Institutions,* Online conference hosted by Hugenot Kollege (24-25 March 2022).

Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a fire that breaks out backstage in a theatre.[1] A clown charges out onto the stage to warn the audience of the danger but, because he is already dressed up for his show, the audience members mistake his warning for comedy. They laugh and clap and so fail to respond to the threat. Kierkegaard speculates that the world is likely to end "amid general applause" like this because so many people believe that what they are witnessing is only "a joke." In this story, Kierkegaard sets up a distinction—along soteriological lines—between what appears and what may be concealed by appearance. Of course, Kierkegaard's clown is a symbol for Christ. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness fails to comprehend it.[2]

The people misunderstand the clown partly because of what they expect from the theatrical world they have entered. What is not anticipated recedes from view. "[A]ppearances," G. K. Chesterton notes, have something to do with "disappearances."[3] It is this gap—and something of the bridging of this gap—between appearances and disappearances that I want to address here. However, I want to do so from the opposite perspective to the one we find in Kierkegaard's parable. I regard the opposite perspective as the more pertinent one in our time. In this age, if people miss the news that would save them, it would more likely be because they are taking things *too* seriously.[4] If anything, our clowns are believed at the expense of their clowning.[5] But then, thank God, we have thinkers like Chesterton who do not accept this status quo.

At the very end of his book *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chesterton makes a claim regarding the "pathos" of Christ, which was "natural," and "almost casual." But he contends that one dimension of Christ's pathos

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard. 2007. *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, edited by Charles E Moore. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 404; Søren Kierkegaard. 1978. *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, edited by Thomas C. Oden. New Jersey: Princeton, 3. The parable in question is based on real events; see Joakim Garff. 2005. *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography,* translated by Bruce H. Kirmisse. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 774.

[2] John 1.5.

[3] GK Chesterton. 1993 [1925]. *The Everlasting Man.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 265.

[4] I think of Peter Berger's designation of the comic as a "signal of transcendence" and how this signal is blocked so easily in an age of overseriousness. See Peter Berger. 1997. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. New York: Walter De Gruyter, 205.

[5] Just as Dave Chappelle.

remained remarkably hidden—and is therefore worth remarking on—namely his "mirth."[6] The word *mirth*, a synomym for *amusement*, is the last word of that book. It is jotted down not as a flippant observation but as an exclamation mark. But because Chesterton offers no justification for attributing mirth to Christ, the question remains open as to whether there is more than a merely subjective reason for his claim. It is therefore my aim here to account for his claim on a philosophical and theological basis. I want to articulate how there is in Chesterton's writings, especially exemplified in his metaphysical thriller *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1907), a kind of incarnational phenomenology at work that reconciles the more explicit dimensions of Christ's pathos with concealed divine mirth.[7] I only provide a rough sketch of this here.

The Man Who Was Thursday opens with a dialogue, or rather an argument, between two poets in the suburb of Saffron Park. The setting is significant. For one thing, it is a real place and not a mere fictional conceit. Chesterton takes the time to articulate it as a place in which being subverts imagining even as it encourages imagination. One young man there, for instance, "with the long, auburn hair and the impudent face—that young man was not really a poet; but surely he was a poem." And an "old gentleman with the wild, white beard and the wild, white hat—that venerable humbug was not really a philosopher; but at least he was the cause of philosophy in others." Chesterton mocks the scientist who shows up in the suburb, too: "That scientific gentleman with the bald, egg-like head and the bare, bird-like neck had no real right to the airs of science that he assumed. He had not discovered anything new in biology; but what biological creature could he have discovered more singular than himself?"[8]

What is important right at the outset is not so much the *ideas* that people in this setting have but *who they are in the flesh*. This is vital for understanding Chesterton's work as a whole. In his book *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), he writes, "Each human soul has in a sense to enact for itself the gigantic humility of the Incarnation. Every man must descend into the flesh to meet mankind."[9] Chesterton is clear to mention that this atmosphere of incarnation in Saffron Park feels like a "comedy."[10] In this place in which reality constantly throws

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[6] G. K. Chesterton. 1986. *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 365-366.

[7] My selection of *The Man Who Was Thursday* as my primary guide for answering the above aim fits Michael Hurley's suggestion that Chesterton's fiction should be read as philosophy rather than just as fancy. Scholars make careful distinctions between genres and their attributes but no such distinction was present in Chesterton's mind when he wrote that marvelous story. See Michael D. Hurley. 2012. *G. K. Chesterton.* Horndon: Northcote House.

[8] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 35.

[9] G. K. Chesterton. *Collected Works, Volume IV: What's Wrong with the World, The Superstition of Divorce, Eugenics and Other Evils, and others.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 93-94.

[10] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 35.

into question the way that people conceptualise it, we find the birthplace of laughter. Although the novel itself is very funny, Chesterton has given it a surprsing subtitle; it is *A Nightmare.* I'll say more on this below.

In this setting, as I mentioned, two poets are arguing. The poets in question are Gabriel Syme and Lucian Gregory. We soon learn that Gabriel Syme symbolises order and Lucian Gregory symbolises chaos, although the line between order and chaos is not so clear.[11] It is no mistake that the two characters have names that echo the names of angels, although the connection between *Lucian* Gregory and *Lucifer* is less obvious.[12] He is an anarchist who quite literally wants to blow things up with bombs. Chesterton takes *anarchy* as a synonym for *nihilism*. It implies the "[hatred] of life itself."[13] The main point of contention between the poets revolves around the nature of poetry. To put it misleadlingly simply, Gregory sees art and anarchy as coextensive.[14] For him, to make poetry exciting, the poet must aim to constantly pervert norms. The anarchist claims that an artist "disregards all governments" and "abolishes all conventions"; he insists that "[t]he poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the [London] Underground Railway." Against this, Syme regards poetry as ordering. Syme believes that the London Underground really is "the most poetical thing in the world." This upsets Gregory who tells Syme he is talking nonsense. After all, he explains, "Why do all the clerks and navvies in the railway trains look ... so very sad and tired?"[15] The anarchist speculates that the people on a train are despondent because they know that the train will end up precisely where they expect it to end up. Where is the thrill and adventure in that?

Syme, who is a better poet (and a better psychologist) than Gregory, refuses to take this appearance at face value. If people can remain so blasé on the Underground, it is because they have overlooked and forgotten what disappears from view. They have become habituated to custom and so have forgotten how remarkable the customary is. On the surface, everything can seem placid and banal and lacking in spirit—and therefore also lacking in meaning. But this surface is not the whole story. "The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark," Syme purposes. "[T]he gross, obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when a man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when a man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull; because

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[11] Michael D. Hurley. 2012. *G. K. Chesterton.* Horndon: Northcote House, 29.

[12] In the end, the hint of this connection is made explicit as Gregory is revealed later to be a devil incarnate.

[13] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 82.

[14] Chesterton attacks Gregory's position on poetry directly in an article written for *The Speaker,* published on 29 March 1902. That article, 'A Sermon on Cheapness' is reprinted in G. K. Chesterton. 1975. *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks and Other Essays*, edited by Dorothy Collins. London: Wheaton, 1-4.

[15] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 39.

in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria [Station], and lo! it is Victoria."[16]

Chesterton suggests that behind every appearance of order is an occluded battle against disorder. Syme remarks "that every time a train comes in" he feels "that it has broken past batteries of besiegers, and that man has won a battle against chaos."[17] Already in this, we sense something of how Chesterton is gesturing to mirth beyond the serious, even if we have not yet grasped the meaning of this. If trains and train schedules seem boring it is not because they are boring. Behind them is the delight of being able to grant order to the world. "There are no uninteresting things," Chesterton writes in *Heretics* (1905), "only uninterested people."[18] Behind the given is an act of creation. To be clear, this is not to simplistically side with order *against* chaos, just as one would not necessarily side with the univocal against the equivocal. The dichotomy is not ultimately as clear as it would seem. Equivocities remain in being itself. The point is that the tension between order and choas is *mediated*; and it is in this grace called mediation that we find the hidden work of mirth.[19]

Chesterton has a problem with a particular mindset that insists on making the world small—that is, on reducing being to one's conception of being. The poet goes against this tendency, and so gives himself over to the call of the real. "God made man so that he was capable of coming into contact with reality," writes Chesterton in his biography of *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933), "and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder."[20] Sadly, as Chesterton points out, "[i]n most important matters, man has always been free to ruin himself."[21] He will ruin his chances of participating in the real. Still, in the archetypal tension between order and chaos, God announces light—and there is light.[22] There is, to use Syme's metaphor, the London Underground.

In considering the book of Job that acts as inspiration for *The Man Who Was Thursday*, a topic that alone deserves several papers and books, Chesterton mentions especially how God announces his entrance by declaring that behind the obvious difficulties of life there is delight: "When the morning stars sang together, and

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[16] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 39.

[17] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 41.

[18] G. K. Chesterton. 1986. *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 54.

[19] I write on the grace of mediation in the conclusion of my book on Chesterton. See: Duncan Reyburn. 2016. *Seeing Things as They Are: G. K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning.* Eugene: Cascade. I also articulate something of what this mediatory mirth looks like in Duncan Reyburn. 2021. A Kindly Scandal: A Mimetic Theory of Humor. *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 28: 201-236.

[20] G. K. Chesterton. 2002. *St. Thomas Aquinas & St. Francis of Assisi.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 170.

[21] G. K. Chesterton. *Collected Works, Volume IV: What's Wrong with the World, The Superstition of Divorce, Eugenics and Other Evils, and others.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 142.

[22] Genesis 1.1-3.

all the sons of God shouted for joy."[23] Perhaps even suffering hides a mirthful face. The revealed order conceals a mystery, and that mystery suggests transcendental joy. Chesterton invites his reader to look again, to resist taking the familiar as equal to the settling of a matter. How does he do this? Importantly, he refuses to let his rhetorical constructions linger as merely rhetorical. In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, for example, he is not trying to position himself within a contingent distinction between the orderly and the chaotic but wants to aim for an ontological or perhaps phenomenological stability beyond this contingency. Even Lucian Gregory's disastrous nihilism stems, in part, from an unconscious desire to uncover what is going on beneath the surface—and yet he keeps getting stuck on the surface. Against this, Chesterton asks us to leave the representational world and enter the drama of being itself.

In the end, insofar as the plot of *The Man Who Was Thursday* goes, the bold claims of these two poets cannot be settled except by experience. The poet must become the poem, or must recover the sense that he has always been a poem before being a poet. Gregory invites Syme to attend a meeting of anarchists to see for himself what sort of chaos they are plotting. Before the other members arrive and before the meeting commences, Gregory explains that he at one time made a habit of disguising himself in various ways. Again, Chesterton draws attention to *appearance* to suggest *disappearance* or concealment. However, no one ever believed Gregory's disguises and so he ended up simply dressing like an anarchist. Again, no one believed him. Somehow showing the obvious truth became the best way to conceal the truth. No one would expect someone who looks like an anarchist to be an anarchist. If it walks like an anarchist and swims like an anarchist and quacks like an anarchist, it must be a perfectly sensible intellectual with no insidious motives at all. Of course, *appearance* does not have to mean *total* disappearance. Often things are precisely what they seem.

Still, Syme ends up at that meeting of anarchists, each of whom is named after a day of the week. Hilariously, Syme convinces the anarchist council to elect him (not Gregory) as the replacement of the former Thursday, who recently died. He does so by sounding far more dangerous than Gregory does—by being, in speech, more anarchic than the anarchist. Despite Gregory's protesting, Syme becomes the new Thursday. As this scene among the anarchists reveals, Chesterton renders the line between chaos and order, and thus between appearance and disappearance, ever more confusing or perhaps more mysterious. The novel shows, through the experience of the protagonist Syme, a constant determination to unmask what appears and thus to reveal what is hidden. Identities are constantly mistaken, then corrected, as one-by-one each of the members of the collective

[23] See Job 38.6-11; G. K. Chesterton. *In Defense of Sanity.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 91-102.

of anarchists is revealed to be a policeman just like Syme. There's a perfect metaphor for revealing order *beneath* any appearance of chaos.

And yet, this disclosure confronts Syme, and so also the reader, with a paradox: unmasking does not put an end to mystery. Revelation often *deepens* the mystery. At one significant moment in his story, Syme cries out, "Listen to me ... Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—."[24]

This declaration begins to suggest why this story is given the subtitle, *A Nightmare.* Symbolically speaking, the antidote to a nightmare is not a dream (something pleasant) but the act of waking up (something that is potentially more unpleasant than the nightmare). And yet, the idea that we cannot see the hidden face of things suggests how difficult this waking up is. There is anguish in this. Syme is insistent on the Job-like suffering he experiences in endeavouring to see the hidden face of things.[25] Of course, this has tremendous theological significance. It echoes the scene in which Moses asks to see God's glory in the book of Exodus. God responds that he will "make" his "goodness pass before [Moses]" but since no one can see his face and live, he will show Moses only his back.[26] There is something of this echoed in what Chesterton writes in his book on the artist GF Watts, who was fond of painting the backs of people:

> The back is the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: it is impossible to speak about it. It is the part of man that he knows nothing of; like an outlying province forgotten by an emperor. It is a common saying that anything may happen behind our backs: transcendentally considered the thing has an eerie truth about it. Eden may be behind our backs, or Fairyland. But this mystery of the human back has again its other side in the strange impression produced on those behind: to walk behind anyone along a lane is a thing that, properly speaking, touches the oldest nerve of awe.[27]

As Chesterton more than hints here, knowing the back of things is to not know them. But that we *only* see the back of things has two implications. First, it means that we necessarily feel, in our encounters with the real, that there is always more there than we are conscious of. Perception itself, when we allow it to be itself,

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[24] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 247.
[25] G. K. Chesterton. 1999 [1907]. *The Man Who Was Thursday.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 263.
[26] Exodus 33.18-20.
[27] G. K. Chesterton. 1904. *G. F. Watts.* London: Duckworth, 136-139.

cannot take things at face value. Second, it means that we must speculate about the nature of the face of things. And yet, as suggested by the first implication, this speculation cannot merely exist at the level of what we are conscious of and what we might be able to articulate. We know this especially in Chesterton's strong sense of the contingent.[28] This is not merely a conceptual category but is something felt in one's very depths. In this felt sense of the contingent, what appears is decidedly not self-caused. Its meaning is sustained by that what transcends it. It is given but that only means that there is *that* which gives it or *one* who gives it. Perception itself, if allowed to be itself, refuses to take things at face value—it refuses to linger with abstractions and must, like Gabriel Syme, step into the drama of meaning.

Still, we do fall into the trap of training perception to accept limits that are not inherently present within perception while at the same time refusing the limits that are there. Perhaps better stated, we have a habit of causing perception to fall into disuse and misuse. If Lucian Gregory sees only the value of chaos, it is because he is not attending to the real. This is a reminder of Chesterton's awareness of how we lose contact with reality. I quote here at length from Chesterton's *The Defendant:*

> Religion has had to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star upon which we dwelt. For the mind and eyes of the average man this world is as lost as Eden and as sunken as Atlantis. There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves.[29] The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not[only] towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility. This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall. It is a strange thing that men ... have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.[30]

Note here how Chesterton connects the fall with an over-reliance on our conceptual configurations. We fail to perceive what is right in front of our eyes, and so require something that will allow us to reconnect with it. Our abstractions are often a defence against the real. Paul Rowan explains how crucial this passage that I've just

[28] See Miguel Romero & Duncan Reyburn. 2021. Towards an expansive objective and a restricted experience in Everyday Aesthetics: A Chestertonian metaxological approach. *Revista KEPES* 24(18):197-231.

[29] In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton claims, "the most dangerous environment of all is the commodious environment." G. K. Chesterton. 1986. *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 323.

[30] G. K. Chesterton. 1907 [1901] *The Defendant.* London: JM Dent, 12-13.

read to you is for understanding Chesterton's perpetual concern with how "human beings have forgotten who they are."[31] The trouble is not just in the forgetting of the world but in the forgetting of our very selves—that is, with losing a felt sense of our embeddedness within the drama of meaning. What does the forgetting of self look like? For Chesterton, in sticking with the biblical envisioning of pride as going before a fall while also noting how this distorts even our capacity for humility,[32] the result is over-seriousness. The prideful do not laugh easily and are in fact monstrous in their seriousness.[33] In *Orthodoxy,* Chesterton suggests that "[m]an is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial." He is very critical of over-seriousness. Taking hilarity out of the picture causes people to be unhealthily complacent. Over-seriousness produces stale perceptions, and this is not something Chesterton can tolerate. He writes:

> The swiftest things are the softest things. A bird is active, because a bird is soft. A stone is helpless, because a stone is hard. The stone must by its own nature go downwards, because hardness is weakness. The bird can of its nature go upwards, because fragility is force ... Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. ... Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. One 'settles down' into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to ... self-forgetfulness ... Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be ... much more sensible ... to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good Times leading article than a good joke in Punch. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light.[34]

Chesterton's concern is with *connection* to reality. And seriousness, on its own, is no guarantee of this. In fact, on its own, it almost certainly ensures disconnection. Chesterton offers that it is "the test of one's seriousness" to "use silly metaphors on serious questions." In fact, a "responsible religion" can be defended "grotesquely." "It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it."[35] He is not encouraging irreverence here. In fact, he sees *humor* and *humanity* and *humility*, which in English are linked etymologically, as connected with an essential vulnerability to being. "If you have a good heart," he writes, "you will always have some lightness of heart; you will always have the power of enjoying special human feasts, and positive human

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[31] Paul Rowan. 2017. *The Scrappy Evangelist*. Charlotte: ACS Books, 48.

[32] Proverbs 16:18; Augustine, *City of God* 14. 13; *De Genesi ad litteram* 11. 14. 18.

[33] G. K. Chesterton, *The Speaker,* 10 October 1903.

[34] G. K. Chesterton. 1986. *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies.* San Francisco: Ignatius, 325-326.

[35] G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, 9 June 1906.

good news. But the heart which is there to be lightened will also be there to be hurt."[36] If Christ could show his sorrows, this is precisely a signal of his capacity for joviality. The same vulnerability to being supports both sorrow and levity. Mirth is not the *opposite* of seriousness but its *obverse.* "The more one sufferers," Kierkegaard writes, "the more ... one has a sense for the comic."[37]

As the above suggests, Chesterton is not merely encouraging a correct view of things in the sense of providing a checklist of doctrines. He is not arguing for a mere reconceptualisation of the real—as if the problem is in our thinking primarily and not in us. Rather, he is encouraging us to embrace what is—*as lived*. This is the central key to understanding his view that Christ's hidden face is mirthful. This is not to explain Christ but to embrace the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation more fully. Chesterton writes the following on what it means to be human and already here we find a hint of how the mirthful points to the more than mirthful:

> "Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself."[38]

[36] G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News,* 11 January 1908.
[37] Søren Kierkegaard. 1978. *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, edited by Thomas C. Oden. New Jersey: Princeton, 30.
[38] G. K. Chesterton. 1993. *The Everlasting Man*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 36.