

Praise for *The Everlasting Man: A Guide to G.K. Chesterton's Masterpiece*

“Chesterton is arguably the greatest apologist of the Catholic literary revival, and *The Everlasting Man* is arguably his greatest work of apologetics. Dale Ahlquist is arguably the greatest apologist for Chesterton and the key figure in the Chesterton revival. There is, therefore, no better person to guide us through *The Everlasting Man* than Dale Ahlquist. He takes us further up and further in. He dives and delves deeper. He enables us to fathom the depths of Chesterton’s brilliance as expressed in what is probably Chesterton’s most brilliant work. I am so grateful to Word on Fire for publishing this indispensable book. It is an answer to prayer.”

—**Joseph Pearce**, author of *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton*

“St. John Paul II once wrote that ‘Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is posed by every human life.’ One hundred years ago, G.K. Chesterton set out to unpack this idea in his spiritual odyssey, *The Everlasting Man*. If it is true that Chesterton was one of the most complete writers of the twentieth century, then *The Everlasting Man* is the most complete book Chesterton ever wrote. Dale Ahlquist, arguably the world’s greatest living expert on the writings of G.K. Chesterton, has given us an opportunity, with helpful notes and ongoing commentary, to delve deeply into the genius of Chesterton on the most fundamental questions of the human experience. Hard to categorize, *The Everlasting Man* is a philosophical, theological, historical, and literary masterpiece. I actually read this book in my undergraduate years, before my conversion to the Catholic Church, and it was a huge stepping stone in my own crossing of the Tiber. I am thrilled that this epic work is being republished again. The reader will not be disappointed!”

—**Bishop James Conley**, Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska

“When people ask me what three books to read to understand the world, I always tell them Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*, because it contains all social thought; Undset’s *Kristen Lavransdatter*, because it contains all moral theology; and Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man*, because it contains all human history. Why? All human history converges on the Incarnation and then proceeds from it. Chesterton stands alongside St. Augustine in opening our eyes and hearts to this reality, and Dale Ahlquist has done nothing short of heroic work in at last giving mankind an edition worthy of the masterpiece.”

—**Christopher Check**, president of Catholic Answers

“G.K. Chesterton’s robust and rollicking *The Everlasting Man* is one of those volumes that is everlastingly fresh and up to date. Nevertheless, many of Chesterton’s contemporary references can make the text confusing for the modern reader. Dale Ahlquist, Chesterton’s supreme commentator and promoter, provides the notes and explanations that illuminate the obscure references for a new generation of readers. This volume should be on the required reading list for every high school and college student.”

—**Fr. Dwight Longenecker**, blogger, speaker, and author of *Beheading Hydra* and *Immortal Combat*

 THE 
EVERLASTING
 MAN 

THE
EVERLASTING
MAN
G.K. CHESTERTON

A GUIDE TO
G.K. CHESTERTON'S MASTERPIECE

Introduction, Notes, and Commentary by Dale Ablquist

WORD  on FIRE.

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Acknowledgments

As G.K. Chesterton says in his prefatory note, I make no claim to learning, and I have had to depend for some things on gentlemen who are far more learned than I am. Among these are Dr. Peter Floriani, Fr. Joseph Fessio (and some of his minions), Rev. Mr. Nathan Allen, Steve Miller, Julian Ahlquist (my son, who teaches philosophy at Chesterton Academy), and a not always reliable but nonetheless amazing resource called the internet. I also consulted some books lying around in my study, but why should I tell you which ones they were? The main resource, however, has been Chesterton himself, whose other writings shed even more light on this particular monumental work. He is all of a piece, and so, whenever possible, I have him serve as commentator instead of me.

Editor's Introduction

Out of some dark forest under some ancient dawn there must come towards us, with lumbering yet dancing motions, one of the very queerest of the prehistoric creatures. We must see for the first time the strangely small head set on a neck not only longer but thicker than itself, as the face of a gargoyle is thrust out upon a gutter-spout, the one disproportionate crest of hair running along the ridge of that heavy neck like a beard in the wrong place; the feet, each like a solid club of horn, alone amid the feet of so many cattle; so that the true fear is to be found in showing, not the cloven, but the uncloven hoof.

When I teach this book to high school seniors at Chesterton Academy, I start by having them read this passage, and then I ask them to tell me what Chesterton is describing. The answers have included a human, a dragon, a dog, a wolf, a bull, a giraffe, a monster. Only one in a hundred gets it right. A horse.

Then they go back and re-read the description and realize it accurately depicts a horse, but it is so unusual because they had never thought of a horse in that way. Exactly. We are too familiar with horses to see them as the strange creatures they are. We've made up our minds too quickly about horses. Perhaps we can better

understand them and even appreciate them if we were to step back, including stepping back from the horsy ideas we already have, and get the wider view and the whole view—and then ride into the sunset with a better perspective.

The other reason they get the answers so wildly wrong is that they seize on only one feature or characteristic and neglect the whole of the description.

So, too, with Christianity. Chesterton argues that we are too close to Christianity to see it properly. This is especially true of the skeptics and the scoffers, the ones who think they know what it is they have rejected. They need to keep looking at the thing they have been staring at but have not yet managed to see. “Now, there is a law written in the darkest of the Books of Life, and it is this: If you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it the thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time.”¹

The purpose of this book is to get the reader to see Christianity for the first time.

“In reading Chesterton . . . I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.”² So wrote C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy*, the memoir of his conversion from atheism to Christianity. *The Everlasting Man* was the book that changed the direction of Lewis’ life. He said it was the most reasonable explanation of Christianity that he had ever read. He often recommended

1. G.K. Chesterton (hereafter GKC), “The Man in Green,” *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*.

2. C.S. Lewis, “Guns and Good Company,” *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*.

the book to anyone who was thinking about—or skeptical about—the Christian faith.

Some say this book is G.K. Chesterton's masterpiece. That's okay for them to say that. I'm always ready to accept this nomination—and other nominations as well. I think that Chesterton's chief weakness is that he wrote too many masterpieces: *Orthodoxy*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, *Lepanto*, *Charles Dickens*, *St. Francis of Assisi*, *St. Thomas Aquinas*. You could also put together a large collection of his essays that are masterpieces. And then there is the whole Father Brown corpus (which features many corpses).

Even Chesterton's critics—those who have actually taken the trouble to read him—have a favorite book or books that they cannot resist, that they completely like even against their will. Even if they refuse to arrive at Chesterton's conclusions, they want to travel with him. Even if his paradoxical and apparently wandering style drives them bananas, they keep reading.

There are the obvious cases of H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, philosophical opponents of Chesterton who cherished him as a friend and read everything he wrote as it came into print. But we should include lesser lights who were the butts of Chesterton's criticisms but remained attracted to his writing. The English pragmatist philosopher George Moore was creatively skewered in Chesterton's 1905 book *Heretics* (another masterpiece): "Mr. Moore hates Catholicism because it breaks up the house of looking-glasses in which he lives."³ And yet, when Chesterton's play *Magic* (another masterpiece) premiered in 1913, Moore could not stop returning

3. GKC, "The Moods of Mr. George Moore," *Heretics*.

to see it, enraptured from the first line to the last. He wrote to a friend, "I am not exaggerating when I say that of all modern plays, I like it the best."⁴

As for Chesterton's unique literary manner, one contemporary critic wrote,

Mr. Chesterton's style of writing reminds us sometimes of the thunderous, declamatory sentences of Swinburne hurling his elaborate anathemas at Walt Whitman; sometimes, even in the same column, of the primitive, incoherent vaporings of a youngster's essay. This formlessness was all very well a few years ago, but now that we know that he has nearly always good things to say, things worth hearing, we are concerned about his manner of saying them.⁵

I am reminded of Peter van Straaten, who, in one of his painfully witty literary cartoons, has one woman say to another, "You know what it is about her books? I always think, if only I could write like her . . . I'd do it completely differently." Supposedly Evelyn Waugh said something similar about *The Everlasting Man*. He praised the book but said he intended to rewrite it. He never did.

But here's what Waugh actually did say in print, which is quite different: "In [*The Everlasting Man*] all [Chesterton's] random thoughts are concentrated and refined; all his aberrations made straight. It is a great popular book, one of the few really great popular books of the century; the triumphant assertion that a book can

4. "George Moore on Magic," in *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*.

5. W. L. Rewick, "The Chesterton Manner," in *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*.

be both great and popular. . . . It is brilliantly clear. It met a temporary need and survives as a permanent monument.”⁶

You will notice an ellipsis in the above quotation. Here's the sentence I left out: “And it needs no elucidation.” Well. Here we are. We are a century removed from the book's first appearance, and we are on a different continent. A little elucidation, it turns out, is needed. Many of those things that might have been obvious to those reading it in the time and place where the book was first published now require a footnote here, an explanation there, and a bit of commentary both here and there. Part of the problem is that our educational institutions no longer provide the basis of classical learning upon which this book is built. Most of the literary, historical, mythological, philosophical, and theological references are largely lost on today's readers. Of course, the other problem is that these institutions also don't assign this book, robbing a whole generation of its literary accomplishment if not its thought-provoking and challenging thesis. It's too religious, and so it's censored. And it's by G.K. Chesterton, who is not on the list of acceptable authors, and so it's censored. In spite of Waugh saying that this book “survives as a permanent monument,” we have sometimes witnessed a curious disregard for, if not a deliberate dismantling of, permanent monuments.

Just as Chesterton describes in this book how early Christianity went through its period when it “was important enough to be ignored” before it was actively suppressed, so Chesterton is going through that period of being important enough to be ignored,

6. From Waugh's review of Garry Wills' very unsatisfactory *Chesterton—Man and Mask*, *National Review*, April 22, 1961.

with early signs of being actively suppressed—in which case, he is assured of his literary immortality.

At the outset of this book, Chesterton says that he is taking a historical approach rather than a theological one, even though the subject in most people's minds is associated with theology. The subject, after all, is Jesus Christ. He is the Everlasting Man of the title. But in taking the historical approach, Chesterton is asking us to consider the whole history of the world. When he wrote a book about St. Francis of Assisi, he held that to begin with the birth of Francis would be to miss the whole point of the story. He takes a similar approach here. In fact, the birth of the main character does not occur until almost two-thirds of the way through the book. To say that the back story is important would be something of an understatement. But Chesterton has confined himself to that part of the world's story that we actually know and has not included the vastly speculative realm of pre-history. There is no record of that, which is why it is not history.

We cannot understand who Jesus is unless we get a good picture of the world that led up to his brief time on this earth. Then we can better see the way in which that world changed after he made his appearance. We cannot understand Christianity unless we first understand paganism. And “he who [cannot] understand paganism cannot understand Christianity.”⁷

It would be paradoxical to use books as bookends, but we could argue that *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* represent the two bookends of Chesterton's writing. Everything else fits between them, everything else refers to them in one way or another. Both

7. GKC, *G.K.'s Weekly*, April 28, 1928.

describe a journey that ends at home, though in the first case one arrives at home accidentally after trying get somewhere else, and in the second case one makes the arduous journey home because that was always the real destination. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton describes the typical story of the man with amnesia who suddenly wakes up and discovers that he doesn't know who he is. Chesterton says we are all in that state. We have all forgotten who we are. In *The Everlasting Man*, he describes the man who is trying to find his home because he did not stay at home. This also describes all of us. We are homeless. We are lost. And so, to combine the conundrums of both books, we are trying to figure out *who* we are and *where* we are.

All the other things that Chesterton wrote—and wrote about—are found in these two books: the artistic rendering of reality, the search for ultimate meaning, the sharp reality of evil, the romance of adventure, the adventure of romance, the struggle for daily bread, the festivity at the table, the dread of war, the cry for justice, the miracle of birth, the pain of death, the riddle of suffering, and the deeper riddle of joy. Chronologically, they are not the beginning and end of his writing. But in the lettering of his mind, they are the alpha and the omega.

In the last chapter of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton reveals the thesis of *The Everlasting Man*, a book that he would write almost two decades later:

Once Heaven came upon the earth with a power or seal called the image of God, whereby man took command of nature; and once again (when in empire after empire men had been found

wanting) Heaven came to save mankind in the awful shape of a man.⁸

In other words, man is different from all other creatures, and Jesus is different from all other men. It seems to be true, and if it is true, it is a truth that affects everything. That is the thesis he was setting himself up to write, and apparently had been waiting to write it for a long time. Its roots can perhaps be seen in a few lines of verse he penned when he was young:

There was a man who dwelt in the east centuries ago,
 And now I cannot look at a sheep or a sparrow,
 A lily or a cornfield, a raven or a sunset,
 A vineyard or a mountain, without thinking of him;
 If this be not to be divine, what is it?⁹

That Chesterton's career as a writer was leading up to writing this book is certainly the opinion of Fr. John O'Connor, the priest who was the inspiration for Chesterton's famous detective, Father Brown. He was also the priest who received Chesterton into the Catholic Church in July 1922.

It now seems strange that I saw him less after the memorable July Sunday when his genius consummated itself by entering the Kingdom of Heaven with the formalities of the Kingdom. I had an instinct that he ought to find out the best things for himself, and the dear soul went at it with a will, in three years producing

8. GKC, "Authority and the Adventurer," *Orthodoxy*.

9. GKC, "Parable," *Collected Poetry*.

his masterpiece, *The Everlasting Man*. It is in the middle, close and difficult reading because of the *density* of the matter. He took the whole jungle of Comparative Religion (the "Science" of) upon his hayfork, and made hay. But anthologies not yet dreamed will produce pages as discoveries of what English prose can be. He had at last a thesis worthy of his declamatory powers, and he was not teaching himself philosophy, he had mastered all that. Peace! His triumph shall be sung by some yet unmoulded tongue, far on in summers that we shall not see.¹⁰

When Fr. O'Connor wrote those words, mine was one of those "yet unmoulded tongues." It is a privilege now to extol the triumph of this particular masterpiece of G.K. Chesterton. I think his prose is a marvel. It is poetic. It is also potent. He stuffs this book full of facts and allusions, but succeeds in not making it stuffy, and delivers the prize he has promised. With this edition, we have stuffed it even fuller but have also tried to avoid making it stuffy. The history of the world should hold one's attention. We have retained Chesterton's English spellings in the text (e.g., scepticism, realise, neighbour, etc.), but the notes and commentary are full-bore American, but not, I hope, boring.

Just as creation reveals much about its Author, this book will reveal much about its author as well. We will learn some of Chesterton's own everlasting qualities, his virtues: first his humility, then his humor, then his astonishing insight, then his goodness and his charity. This is ultimately a work of love. With this book, G.K. Chesterton has fulfilled the two great commandments.

10. John O'Connor, "XXV," *Father Brown on Chesterton*.

 THE 

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Prefatory Note

This book needs a preliminary note that its scope be not misunderstood. The view suggested is historical rather than theological,¹ and does not deal directly with a religious change which has been the chief event of my own life;² and about which I am already writing a more purely controversial volume.³ It is impossible, I hope, for any Catholic to write any book on any subject, above all this subject, without showing that he is a Catholic; but this study is not specially concerned with the differences between a Catholic and a Protestant. Much of it is devoted to many sorts of Pagans rather than any sort of Christians; and its thesis is that those who say that Christ stands side by side with similar myths, and his religion side by side

1. Chesterton insists that this is a book of history rather than theology. But theology comes into it. So does everything else. A history of the world can hardly leave such things out. "History is every bit as controversial as theology" (GKC, *Illustrated London News*, June 12, 1920).

2. Chesterton is referring to his conversion. He was received into the Catholic Church on July 30, 1922, less than three years before this book was published. While this can be considered an ecumenical book, affirming what most Christians believe, Chesterton wisely and honestly acknowledges that his Catholic perspective will color his views.

3. *The Catholic Church and Conversion* was published in 1927, and *The Thing* (often subtitled *Why I Am a Catholic*) was published in 1929. "Controversial" simply means he is making a case on a subject in which there is intense disagreement. Chesterton says that no good can come from a one-sided controversy.

with similar religions, are only repeating a very stale formula contradicted by a very striking fact. To suggest this I have not needed to go much beyond matters known to us all; I make no claim to learning; and have to depend for some things, as has rather become the fashion, on those who are more learned. As I have more than once differed from Mr. H.G. Wells in his view of history,⁴ it is the more right that I should here congratulate him on the courage and constructive imagination which carried through his vast and varied and intensely interesting work; but still more on having asserted the reasonable right of the amateur to do what he can with the facts which the specialists provide.

4. Herbert George Wells (1866–1946), pioneering author of science fiction, who also wrote non-pioneering, non-scientific non-fiction. In his popular *The Outline of History*, published in 1920, H.G. Wells describes mankind as just another product of evolution, and Jesus as just another man. Chesterton says that what Wells did was to write a book and leave out the main character. This typically secular interpretation of history misses the point of history, which is what Chesterton's book attempts to correct. But twenty years earlier, Chesterton already says of Wells: "He is still slightly affected with the great scientific fallacy; I mean the habit of beginning not with the human soul, which is the first thing a man learns about, but with some such thing as protoplasm, which is about the last" (GKC, "On H.G. Wells and the Giants," *Heretics*).

Commentary

Prefatory Note

Most of G.K. Chesterton's books included dedications. *Heretics* was dedicated to his father, *Orthodoxy* to his mother, *The Ballad of the White Horse* to his wife, *The Innocence of Father Brown* to a Jewish school friend.

But *The Everlasting Man* is surprisingly lacking a dedicatory note. It seems to me that it should have been dedicated to the man most responsible for Chesterton writing the book: H.G. Wells.

The Time Machine, The Invisible Man, War of the Worlds, The Island of Dr. Moreau, The First Men on the Moon. If you have ever picked up one of these novels, or almost any novel by H.G. Wells, even *The History of Mr. Polly*, you will slowly realize that you are unable to put it down. He is an absolute master storyteller. His nonfiction, however, has almost the opposite effect. Tossing it away quickly and with great force is the normal reaction. His imaginative science fiction is riveting, while his unimaginable fictive science (and history) is repelling. Although Wells didn't get either the past or the future right, his literary genius is beyond dispute. As G.K. Chesterton says, being wrong is not the same thing as being stupid.⁵

And Wells was remarkably wrong: in his facts, in his philosophy, in his predictions, and in the sorry affairs that filled his life (which included such lovers as Rebecca West and Margaret Sanger).

5. GKC, *Illustrated London News*, March 24, 1917.

But he was right about one thing. He made friends with G.K. Chesterton. Though they disagreed on virtually everything, they spent weekends at each other's homes and immensely enjoyed each other's company. Wells was among the few of Chesterton's closest friends who called him "Gilbert." Everyone else called him "G.K." Likewise, almost no one called H.G. Wells "Herbert." But Chesterton did.

Chesterton would always express his admiration for Wells' writing and great intellect but would criticize his reliance on science and his dismissal of religion along with his wobbly socialist politics. He found Wells' utopias naïve, giving elaborate accounts of man's overcoming small difficulties while assuming that all the great difficulties will have somehow been overcome. It is a critique that still applies to most science fiction. There are a lot of interesting gadgets in the fantasies of the future, but major pieces are still missing from the big puzzle that is all of us.

What is ironic is that the man who placed so much faith in the solutions offered by scientific technology was so despairing of the future. No one would want to live in a Wellsian utopia, where religious belief is persecuted out of existence, where marriage is a cold and clinical decision, and where man's beastliness is generally succumbed to—or man just loses out to the beasts. His last book, *Man at the End of his Tether*, is a painful cry of hopelessness.

In 1920, Wells published his two-volume *The Outline of History*. Chesterton's great colleague Hilaire Belloc wrote a series of articles attacking the book, point-by-point, unleashing the full force of both his vast knowledge of history and his wrath. He particularly dismantled Wells' statements about human evolution and of Church history, exposing Wells' fallacies and logical contradictions.

Wells found himself cornered and was compelled to respond. He wrote a rebuttal, *Mr. Belloc Objects*. Belloc immediately fired off *Mr. Belloc Still Objects*. Belloc had succeeded in humiliating him and demanded that Wells admit that the *Outline* was full of errors. Wells didn't know how to respond without looking like a fool. He actually went to Chesterton and asked him to intervene. Chesterton tried to make peace between the two men, but Belloc would not back down. Belloc and Wells remained enemies the rest of their lives, while Chesterton remained friends to both.

But Chesterton wrote his own rebuttal to Wells' book. It is this book, *The Everlasting Man*. However, it only mentions Wells at the beginning and at the end with just a few passing references in between. This is a work that stands alone, and one need never crack open *The Outline of History* to appreciate the accomplishment of *The Everlasting Man*. But Chesterton never would have written his book if Wells hadn't written his.

It is safe to say that Chesterton had an entirely different effect on Wells than did Belloc. H.G. Wells said that if there was ever a chance of his getting into heaven it would be because he was a friend of G.K. Chesterton.

Introduction

The Plan of This Book

When the world goes wrong, it proves rather that the Church is right.

There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place; and I tried to trace such a journey in a story I once wrote.⁶ It is, however, a relief to turn from that topic to another story that I never wrote. Like every book I never wrote, it is by far the best book that I have ever written.⁷ It is only too probable that I shall never write it, so I will use it symbolically here; for it was a symbol of the same truth. I conceived it as a romance of those vast valleys with sloping sides, like those along which the ancient White Horses of Wessex⁸ are scrawled along the flanks of the hills. It concerned some boy whose farm or cottage stood on such a slope,

6. In Chesterton's novel *Manalive*, the main character, Innocent Smith, decides he wants to see what the front of his home looks like, so he goes out of the back of the house and walks all the way around the world in order to see the front.

7. Among the many books that Chesterton never wrote, he makes mention of *The Neglect of Cheese in European Literature* (in five volumes); *Fifty-Seven Fallacies of the Victorian Age* (in twenty-four volumes); *The Point: Its Position, Importance, Interest and Place in Our Life and Letters*; *Paradox Lost*; *Don'ts for Dogmatists*; *The Flying Grocer*; and a book of poems inspired entirely by the things he found in his pockets.

8. Chesterton's epic *The Ballad of the White Horse* is inspired by one of the ancient chalk figures in Uffington.

and who went on his travels to find something, such as the effigy and grave of some giant; and when he was far enough from home he looked back and saw that his own farm and kitchen-garden, shining flat on the hillside like the colours and quarterings of a shield, were but parts of some such gigantic figure, on which he had always lived, but which was too large and too close to be seen. That, I think, is a true picture of the progress of any really independent intelligence today; and that is the point of this book.

The point of this book, in other words, is that the next best thing to being really inside Christendom is to be really outside it. And a particular point of it is that the popular critics of Christianity are not really outside it. They are on debatable ground, in every sense of the term. They are doubtful in their very doubts. Their criticism has taken on a curious tone; as of a random and illiterate heckling. Thus they make current and anti-clerical cant as a sort of small-talk. They will complain of parsons dressing like parsons; as if we should be any more free if all the police who shadowed or collared us were plainclothes detectives. Or they will complain that a sermon cannot be interrupted, and call a pulpit a coward's castle; though they do not call an editor's office a coward's castle. It would be unjust both to journalists and priests; but it would be much truer of journalists. The clergyman appears in person and could easily be kicked as he came out of church; the journalist conceals even his name so that nobody can kick him. They write wild and pointless articles and letters in the press about why the churches are empty, without even going there to find out if they are empty, or which of them are empty. Their suggestions are more vapid and vacant than the most insipid curate in a three-act farce, and move us to comfort him after the manner of the curate in the Bab Ballads: "Your

mind is not so blank as that of Hopley Porter.”⁹ So we may truly say to the very feeblest cleric: “Your mind is not so blank as that of Indignant Layman or Plain Man or Man in the Street, or any of your critics in the newspapers; for they have not the most shadowy notion of what they want themselves, let alone of what you ought to give them.” They will suddenly turn round and revile the Church for not having prevented the War, which they themselves did not want to prevent; and which nobody had ever professed to be able to prevent, except some of that very school of progressive and cosmopolitan sceptics who are the chief enemies of the Church. It was the anti-clerical and agnostic world that was always prophesying the advent of universal peace; it is that world that was, or should have been, abashed and confounded by the advent of universal war. As for the general view that the Church was discredited by the War—they might as well say that the Ark was discredited by the Flood. When the world goes wrong, it proves rather that the Church is right. The Church is justified, not because her children do not sin, but because they do. But that marks their mood about the whole religious tradition: they are in a state of reaction against it. It is well with the boy when he lives on his father’s land; and well with him again when he is far enough from it to look back on it and see it as a whole. But these people have got into an intermediate state, have fallen into an intervening valley from which they can see neither the heights beyond them nor the heights behind. They cannot get out of the penumbra of Christian controversy. They cannot be

9. *The Bab Ballads* by William S. Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) includes the poem “The Rival Curates,” featuring a curate named Clayton Hooper, who is very mild until he hears that “your mind is not as blank as that of Hopley Porter,” spurring a rivalry in mildness.

Christians and they cannot leave off being anti-Christians. Their whole atmosphere is the atmosphere of a reaction: sulks, perversity, petty criticism. They still live in the shadow of the faith and have lost the light of the faith.

Now the best relation to our spiritual home is to be near enough to love it. But the next best is to be far enough away not to hate it. It is the contention of these pages that while the best judge of Christianity is a Christian, the next best judge would be something more like a Confucian. The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgements; the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic, entangled in the end of a feud of which he never understood the beginning, blighted with a sort of hereditary boredom with he knows not what, and already weary of hearing what he has never heard. He does not judge Christianity calmly as a Confucian would; he does not judge it as he would judge Confucianism. He cannot by an effort of fancy set the Catholic Church thousands of miles away in strange skies of morning and judge it as impartially as a Chinese pagoda. It is said that the great St. Francis Xavier,¹⁰ who very nearly succeeded in setting up the Church there as a tower overtopping all pagodas, failed partly because his followers were accused by their fellow missionaries of representing the Twelve Apostles with the garb or attributes of Chinamen. But it would be far better to see them as Chinamen, and judge them fairly as Chinamen, than to see them as featureless idols merely made to be battered by iconoclasts; or rather as cockshies to be pelted by empty-handed cockneys. It would be better to see the

10. St. Francis Xavier (1506–1552), the great Jesuit missionary to the Far East, where he would have encountered pagodas, the tiered towers often associated with Buddhism.

whole thing as a remote Asiatic cult; the mitres of its bishops as the towering headdresses of mysterious bonzes;¹¹ its pastoral staffs as the sticks twisted like serpents carried in some Asiatic procession; to see the prayer-book as fantastic as the prayer-wheel and the Cross as crooked as the Swastika.¹² Then at least we should not lose our temper as some of the sceptical critics seem to lose their temper, not to mention their wits. Their anti-clericalism has become an atmosphere, an atmosphere of negation and hostility from which they cannot escape. Compared with that, it would be better to see the whole thing as something belonging to another continent, or to another planet. It would be more philosophical to stare indifferently at bonzes than to be perpetually and pointlessly grumbling at bishops. It would be better to walk past a church as if it were a pagoda than to stand permanently in the porch, impotent either to go inside and help or to go outside and forget. For those in whom a mere reaction has thus become an obsession, I do seriously recommend the imaginative effort of conceiving the Twelve Apostles as Chinamen. In other words, I recommend these critics to try to do as much justice to Christian saints as if they were Pagan sages.

But with this we come to the final and vital point. I shall try to show in these pages that when we *do* make this imaginative effort to see the whole thing from the outside, we find that it really looks like what is traditionally said about it inside. It is exactly when the boy gets far enough off to see the giant that he sees that he really

11. A bonze is a Japanese or Chinese Buddhist monk.

12. The swastika, unbeknownst to many people, was a Buddhist symbol long before it was adopted by the Nazis. Although the Nazi Party was started in 1920 (with the swastika as its symbol), this book was written before the party's rise to power.

is a giant. It is exactly when we do at last see the Christian Church afar under those clear and level eastern skies that we see that it is really the Church of Christ. To put it shortly, the moment we are really impartial about it, we know why people are partial to it. But this second proposition requires more serious discussion; and I shall here set myself to discuss it.

As soon as I had clearly in my mind this conception of something solid in the solitary and unique character of the divine story, it struck me that there was exactly the same strange and yet solid character in the human story that had led up to it; because that human story also had a root that was divine. I mean that just as the Church seems to grow more remarkable when it is fairly compared with the common religious life of mankind, so mankind itself seems to grow more remarkable when we compare it with the common life of nature. And I have noticed that most modern history is driven to something like sophistry, first to soften the sharp transition from animals to men, and then to soften the sharp transition from heathens to Christians. Now the more we really read in a realistic spirit of those two transitions the sharper we shall find them to be. It is because the critics are *not* detached that they do not see this detachment; it is because they are not looking at things in a dry light that they cannot see the difference between black and white. It is because they are in a particular mood of reaction and revolt that they have a motive for making out that all the white is dirty grey and the black is not so black as it is painted. I do not say there are not human excuses for their revolt; I do not say it is not in some ways sympathetic; what I say is that it is not in any way scientific. An iconoclast may be indignant; an iconoclast may be justly indignant; but an iconoclast is not impartial. And it is stark

hypocrisy to pretend that nine-tenths of the higher critics and scientific evolutionists and professors of comparative religion are in the least impartial. Why should they be impartial, what is being impartial, when the whole world is at war about whether one thing is a devouring superstition or a divine hope? I do not pretend to be impartial in the sense that the final act of faith fixes a man's mind because it satisfies his mind. But I do profess to be a great deal more impartial than they are; in the sense that I can tell the story fairly, with some sort of imaginative justice to all sides; and they cannot. I do profess to be impartial in the sense that I should be ashamed to talk such nonsense about the Lama of Thibet¹³ as they do about the Pope of Rome, or to have as little sympathy with Julian the Apostate¹⁴ as they have with the Society of Jesus. They are not impartial; they never by any chance hold the historical scales even; and above all they are never impartial upon this point of evolution and transition. They suggest everywhere the grey gradations of twilight, because they believe it is the twilight of the gods. I propose to maintain that whether or not it is the twilight of the gods, it is not the daylight of men.

I maintain that when brought out into the daylight these two things look altogether strange and unique; and that it is only in

13. The Dalai Lama is the title of the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Chesterton spells Tibet "Thibet."

14. Julian the Apostate, fourth-century Roman Emperor, who although raised a Christian, rejected the faith and reverted to paganism, and then actively tried to suppress Christianity—all for naught. His last words were "Vicisti Galilæe" (Thou hast conquered, Galilean). As a young man, GKC wrote a short poem entitled "Julian":

"Vicisti Galilæe," he said, and sank conquered
After wrestling with the most gigantic of powers,
A dead man.

the false twilight of an imaginary period of transition that they can be made to look in the least like anything else. The first of these is the creature called man and the second is the man called Christ. I have therefore divided this book into two parts: the former being a sketch of the main adventure of the human race in so far as it remained heathen; and the second a summary of the real difference that was made by it becoming Christian. Both motives necessitate a certain method, a method which is not very easy to manage, and perhaps even less easy to define or defend.

In order to strike, in the only sane or possible sense, the note of impartiality, it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty. I mean that in one sense we see things fairly when we see them first. That, I may remark in passing, is why children generally have very little difficulty about the dogmas of the Church. But the Church, being a highly practical thing for working and fighting, is necessarily a thing for men and not merely for children. There must be in it for working purposes a great deal of tradition, of familiarity, and even of routine. So long as its fundamentals are sincerely felt, this may even be the saner condition. But when its fundamentals are doubted, as at present, we must try to recover the candour and wonder of the child; the unspoilt realism and objectivity of innocence. Or if we cannot do that, we must try at least to shake off the cloud of mere custom and see the thing as new, if only by seeing it as unnatural. Things that may well be familiar so long as familiarity breeds affection had much better become unfamiliar when familiarity breeds contempt. For in connection with things so great as are here considered, whatever our view of them, contempt must be a mistake. Indeed contempt must be an illusion. We must invoke the

most wild and soaring sort of imagination; the imagination that can see what is there.

The only way to suggest the point is by an example of something, indeed of almost anything, that has been considered beautiful or wonderful. George Wyndham¹⁵ once told me that he had seen one of the first aeroplanes rise for the first time and it was very wonderful; but not so wonderful as a horse allowing a man to ride on him. Somebody else has said that a fine man on a fine horse is the noblest bodily object in the world. Now, so long as people feel this in the right way, all is well. The first and best way of appreciating it is to come of people with a tradition of treating animals properly; of men in the right relation to horses. A boy who remembers his father who rode a horse, who rode it well and treated it well, will know that the relation can be satisfactory and will be satisfied. He will be all the more indignant at the ill-treatment of horses because he knows how they ought to be treated; but he will see nothing but what is normal in a man riding on a horse. He will not listen to the great modern philosopher who explains to him that the horse ought to be riding on the man. He will not pursue the pessimist fancy of Swift¹⁶ and say that men must be despised as monkeys and horses

15. George Wyndham (1863–1913), British statesman and man of letters. Chesterton called him “a man of great intelligence and charm” and enjoyed his company but did not completely share his politics.

16. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Irish satirist who wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. “Swift . . . was a man who could write what nobody else could have written, and often at a time when nobody else would have dared to write it. He could tell the truth about a time in which perhaps more lies were told, and about which perhaps more lies have since been taught, than any other episode in English history. He could say the right thing, and say it exactly rightly; with a deadly detachment or a stunning understatement unmatched in the satires of mankind. But Swift was not a man gifted with the particular grace with

worshipped as gods. And horse and man together making an image that is to him human and civilised, it will be easy, as it were, to lift horse and man together into something heroic or symbolical; like a vision of St. George in the clouds. The fable of the winged horse will not be wholly unnatural to him; and he will know why Ariosto¹⁷ set many a Christian hero in such an airy saddle, and made him the rider of the sky. For the horse has really been lifted up along with the man in the wildest fashion in the very word we use when we speak “chivalry.” The very name of the horse has been given to the highest mood and moment of the man; so that we might almost say that the handsomest compliment to a man is to call him a horse.

But if a man has got into a mood in which he is *not* able to feel this sort of wonder, then his cure must begin right at the other end. We must now suppose that he has drifted into a dull mood, in which somebody sitting on a horse means no more than somebody sitting on a chair. The wonder of which Wyndham spoke, the beauty that made the thing seem an equestrian statue, the meaning

which this literary legend would distinguish him. He was not a man who specially saw a spiritual significance in common things, or learned great lessons from small objects, or had anything about him of the poet who finds poetry in prose. He was a religious man in an irreligious age; but only because he was really too intellectual a man to be merely an irreligious man. He had nothing about him of the mystic, who sees divine symbols everywhere, who turns a stone and starts a wing. There were only too many stones, and not half enough wings, in poor Jonathan Swift's existence, and I fear he was largely saved from scepticism by a contempt for the sceptics. He did not see the glory of God in a broomstick; but he did see something very like a broomstick in the stuck-up wooden-headed young atheist who denied the glory of God” (GKC, *Illustrated London News*, October 15, 1932).

17. Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), Italian poet best known for his epic *Orlando Furioso*, a romance that Chesterton says portrays “holy chivalry,” quite in contrast to what is characteristic of modern knighthood. “Ariosto, talking of knighthood, would say ‘Spurs are won.’ We should simply say, ‘Spurs are worn’” (GKC, *Daily News*, May 18, 1912).

of the more chivalric horseman, may have become to him merely a convention and a bore. Perhaps they have been merely a fashion; perhaps they have gone out of fashion; perhaps they have been talked about too much or talked about in the wrong way; perhaps it was then difficult to care for horses without the horrible risk of being horsy. Anyhow, he has got into a condition when he cares no more for a horse than for a towel-horse. His grandfather's charge at Balaclava¹⁸ seems to him as dull and dusty as the album containing such family portraits. Such a person has not really become enlightened about the album; on the contrary, he has only become blind with the dust. But when he has reached *that* degree of blindness, he will not be able to look at a horse or a horseman at all until he has seen the whole thing as a thing entirely unfamiliar and almost unearthly.

Out of some dark forest under some ancient dawn there must come towards us, with lumbering yet dancing motions, one of the very queerest of the prehistoric creatures. We must see for the first time the strangely small head set on a neck not only longer but

18. The Battle of Balaclava was fought in the Crimean War in 1854, where the British army attacked the Russians in the ill-fated "Charge of the Light Brigade," immortalized in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem of that name:

Half a league, half a league,	"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Half a league onward,	Was there a man dismay'd?
All in the valley of Death	Not tho' the soldier knew
Rode the six hundred.	Someone had blundered.
"Forward, the Light Brigade!	Theirs not to make reply,
Charge for the guns!" he said:	Theirs not to reason why,
Into the valley of Death	Theirs but to do and die.
Rode the six hundred.	Into the valley of Death
	Rode the six hundred.

thicker than itself, as the face of a gargoyle is thrust out upon a gutter-spout, the one disproportionate crest of hair running along the ridge of that heavy neck like a beard in the wrong place; the feet, each like a solid club of horn, alone amid the feet of so many cattle; so that the true fear is to be found in showing, not the cloven, but the uncloven hoof. Nor is it mere verbal fancy to see him thus as a unique monster; for in a sense a monster means what is unique, and he is really unique. But the point is that when we thus see him as the first man saw him, we begin once more to have some imaginative sense of what it meant when the first man rode him. In such a dream he may seem ugly, but he does not seem unimpressive; and certainly that two-legged dwarf who could get on top of him will not seem unimpressive. By a longer and more erratic road we shall come back to the same marvel of the man and the horse; and the marvel will be, if possible, even more marvellous. We shall have again a glimpse of St. George; the more glorious because St. George is not riding on the horse, but rather riding on the dragon.

In this example, which I have taken merely because it is an example, it will be noted that I do not say that the nightmare seen by the first man of the forest is either more true or more wonderful than the normal mare of the stable seen by the civilised person who can appreciate what is normal. Of the two extremes, I think on the whole that the traditional grasp of the truth is the better. But I say that the truth is found at one or other of these two extremes, and is lost in the intermediate condition of mere fatigue and forgetfulness of tradition. In other words, I say it is better to see a horse as a monster than to see it only as a slow substitute for a motorcar. If we have got into *that* state of mind about a horse as something stale, it is far better to be frightened of a horse because it is a good deal too fresh.

Now, as it is with the monster that is called a horse, so it is with the monster that is called a man. Of course the best condition of all, in my opinion, is always to have regarded man as he is regarded in my philosophy. He who holds the Christian and Catholic view of human nature will feel certain that it is a universal and therefore a sane view, and will be satisfied. But if he has lost the sane vision, he can only get it back by something very like a mad vision; that is, by seeing man as a strange animal and realising how strange an animal he is. But just as seeing the horse as a prehistoric prodigy ultimately led back to, and not away from, an admiration for the mastery of man, so the *really* detached consideration of the curious career of man will lead back to, and not away from, the ancient faith in the dark designs of God. In other words, it is exactly when we do see how queer the quadruped is that we praise the man who mounts him; and exactly when we do see how queer the biped is that we praise the Providence that made him.

In short, it is the purpose of this introduction to maintain this thesis: that it is exactly when we do regard man as an animal that we know he is not an animal. It is precisely when we do try to picture him as a sort of horse on its hind legs, that we suddenly realise that he must be something as miraculous as the winged horse that towered up into the clouds of heaven. All roads lead to Rome, all ways lead round again to the central and civilised philosophy, including this road through elf-land and topsy-turvydom. But it may be that it is better never to have left the land of a reasonable tradition, where men ride lightly upon horses and are mighty hunters before the Lord.¹⁹

19. A reference to the ancient biblical figure Nimrod, who is described as “a mighty hunter before the LORD” in Genesis 10:8–10.

So also in the specially Christian case we have to react against the heavy bias of fatigue. It is almost impossible to make the facts vivid, because the facts are familiar; and for fallen men it is often true that familiarity is fatigue. I am convinced that if we could tell the supernatural story of Christ word for word as of a Chinese hero, call him the Son of Heaven instead of the Son of God, and trace his rayed nimbus²⁰ in the gold thread of Chinese embroideries or the gold lacquer of Chinese pottery, instead of the gold leaf of our own old Catholic paintings, there would be a unanimous testimony to the spiritual purity of the story. We should hear nothing then of the injustice of substitution or the illogicality of atonement, of the superstitious exaggeration of the burden of sin or the impossible insolence of an invasion of the laws of nature. We should admire the chivalry of the Chinese conception of a god who fell from the sky to fight the dragons and save the wicked from being devoured by their own fault and folly. We should admire the subtlety of the Chinese view of life, which perceives that all human imperfection is in very truth a crying imperfection. We should admire the Chinese esoteric and superior wisdom, which said there are higher cosmic laws than the laws we know; we believe every common Indian conjurer who chooses to come to us and talk in the same style. If Christianity were only a new oriental fashion, it would never be reproached with being an old and oriental faith. I do not propose in this book to follow the alleged example of St. Francis Xavier with the opposite imaginative intention, and turn the Twelve Apostles into Mandarins; not so much to make them look like natives as to make them look like foreigners. I do not propose to work what

20. A halo or cloud surrounding the head of a saintly or holy figure in art.

I believe would be a completely successful practical joke; that of telling the whole story of the Gospel and the whole history of the Church in a setting of pagodas and pigtailed; and noting with malignant humour how much it was admired as a heathen story, in the very quarters where it is condemned as a Christian story. But I do propose to strike wherever possible this note of what is new and strange, and for that reason the style even on so serious a subject may sometimes be deliberately grotesque and fanciful. I do desire to help the reader to see Christendom from the outside in the sense of seeing it as a whole, against the background of other historic things; just as I desire him to see humanity as a whole against the background of natural things. And I say that in both cases, when seen thus, they stand out from their background like supernatural things. They do *not* fade into the rest with the colours of impressionism; they stand out from the rest with the colours of heraldry; as vivid as a red cross on a white shield or a black lion on a ground of gold. So stands the Red Clay against the green field of nature, or the White Christ against the red clay of his race.²¹

But in order to see them clearly we have to see them as a whole. We have to see how they developed as well as how they began; for the most incredible part of the story is that things which began thus should have developed thus. Anyone who chooses to indulge in mere imagination can imagine that other things might have happened or other entities evolved. Anyone thinking of what might have happened may conceive a sort of evolutionary equality; but anyone facing what did happen must face an exception

21. The human race. The red clay is a reference to Adam, who was made out of the earth, and whose name means "red ground" or "red earth." Christ, who is from the race of Adam, is also set apart from the race of Adam.

and a prodigy. If there was ever a moment when man was only an animal, we can if we choose make a fancy picture of his career transferred to some other animal. An entertaining fantasia might be made in which elephants built in elephantine architecture, with towers and turrets like tusks and trunks, cities beyond the scale of any colossus. A pleasant fable might be conceived in which a cow had developed a costume, and put on four boots and two pairs of trousers. We could imagine a Supermonkey more marvellous than any Superman, a quadrumanous²² creature carving and painting with his hands and cooking and carpentering with his feet. But if we are considering what did happen, we shall certainly decide that man has distanced everything else with a distance like that of the astronomical spaces and a speed like that of the still thunderbolt of the light. And in the same fashion, while we can if we choose see the Church amid a mob of Mithraic²³ or Manichean²⁴ superstitions squabbling and killing each other at the end of the Empire, while we can if we choose imagine the Church killed in the struggle and some other chance cult taking its place, we shall be the more surprised (and possibly puzzled) if we meet it two thousand years afterwards rushing through the ages as the winged thunderbolt of thought and everlasting enthusiasm; a thing without rival or resemblance, and still as new as it is old.

22. Your word of the day. It refers to primates other than humans, having all four feet, which are more like hands because they have opposable digits.

23. Mithras was a pagan god of Persian origin, who gained a following among Roman soldiers. Mithraic worship involved the symbol of a bull, the sacrifice of a bull, and just a lot of bull in general.

24. The Manicheans believed that physical matter was evil and that good (and God) was necessarily purely spiritual. Chesterton devotes a whole chapter to them in his book on St. Thomas Aquinas, and we're going to hear about them again in this book.

Commentary

Introduction

We are now on our fourth introduction to this book. First, there was my editor's introduction, followed by Chesterton's Preface, and then came the introduction above, laying out the plan of what will follow. But with this commentary, we begin again. Because here is where I say that *The Everlasting Man* was my introduction to G.K. Chesterton. It was the first Chesterton book I ever read. I am obliged to mention that I happened to read it on my honeymoon. And I read it in Rome. Because that is where we went on said honeymoon. It was the first time I'd ever been to Rome. So there were many introductions happening all at once. It would complicate things to add that we were there when Pope St. John Paul II was shot, so I won't even mention that because it may detract from the point I'm trying to make, which is that this book begins by telling in one sentence what would be my own story: "There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is stay there." I had to go around the world to read the book. And I had to go around the world again to get home. But as it turned out, my home was Rome. That was the place I had to get back to. Chesterton would eventually lead me to the Roman Catholic Church. But he took me on the scenic route.

Chesterton intends for this book to be an apologetic about Christianity and not Catholicism per se. As a first-time reader and a non-Catholic, I did not discern anything especially Catholic about

the book, so his plan worked. But now that I am meddling with the book, providing notes and commentary and such, I will go into more detail about certain events and dissensions and personalities in the history of Christianity that Chesterton not so much avoids as only touches on. What he says matters; what he doesn't say also matters. But it doesn't matter that he doesn't say it. It's not that he is afraid to go down that road—and neither am I—because all roads lead to Rome.

After beginning by talking about getting home, Chesterton makes reference to the White Horse, the huge and ancient chalk image in England's Chiltern Hills. You can see the image from a distance, but you cannot see it when you are sitting on it. On my first trip to England (twenty years after that trip to Rome), some friends took me to visit the White Horse. We first saw it as we approached from a road in the valley. But eventually, we ventured all the way up the hill and sat on a grassy patch surrounded by the large white swaths of the chalky areas that formed the image and that had been kept clear for three thousand years. Overlooking the valley, we read passages from Chesterton's epic *Ballad of the White Horse*. It was a heady moment for me. As we sat there, I suddenly asked, "Where exactly on the horse are we?" We eventually figured out that we were sitting under the tail! It made the moment less heady, as it were. But even so, Chesterton's metaphor is perfect. People don't see Christianity because they are too close to it. And they do not have a proper perspective of it from where they happen to be. Especially if they find themselves sitting under the tail, as it were.

After the chalk figure of the horse, Chesterton later introduces us to a real horse, and we won't recognize it, because he manages

to describe a horse as if we had never seen a horse before, or rather, never really noticed the thing we thought we knew.

He uses the chalk horse and the real horse to illustrate the same point. The critics of Christianity do not know the thing they are criticizing. They can't even see it. Thus, their criticism "has taken on a curious tone; as of a random and illiterate heckling," which reveals no thoughtfulness or comprehension. They are not objective in their critique of Christianity because they are not far enough away from it to see it objectively. They are only close enough to hate it.

Either Christianity is true or it isn't. But if the believer has to make a case for why it is true, the unbeliever should also be able to make a case for why it is not true. And it should not merely be a reaction; it should consist of something other than "sulks, perversity, and petty criticism."

Chesterton makes the rather bold claim that as a believer, he can be fair to both sides, whereas the unbeliever cannot. "An iconoclast is not impartial." Perhaps Chesterton has the advantage of having been both an outsider and an insider. But you could argue that one who has left the faith has the same advantage. You could. But Chesterton's point is that they never knew the thing they left. And after they left, they were still too close to it to see it. They never made it to the valley to turn around and see that they were living on a giant.

The book is divided into two parts, which just happen to coincide with the same two parts into which history is divided: BC and AD. The parts are not equal. The history before Christ is longer than the history since Christ. But also the story before Christ is complicated. It is the story of civilization but also the downfall of civilization. It is the story of the rise of theology and the rise of

philosophy, but these are two separate stories until the coming of Christ and the founding of the Church. Christianity not only provides a new view of the Creator but of the creation. Part 1 is also the story of the religions that are not Christianity, a story that needs to be told so that we can see how different they are from Christianity. We need the long BC story so that we can see in the AD story that Jesus is different from any other figure in history—either human or divine. He is different from Buddha. He is different from Mithras. He is not just another man, nor is he just another god.

Part One

On the Creature Called Man

The Man in the Cave

Art is the signature of man.

Far away in some strange constellation in skies infinitely remote, there is a small star, which astronomers may some day discover.¹ At least I could never observe in the faces or demeanour of most astronomers or men of science any evidence that they have discovered it; though as a matter of fact they were walking about it all the time. It is a star that brings forth out of itself very strange plants and very strange animals; and none stranger than the men of science. That at least is the way in which I should begin a history of the world, if I had to follow the scientific custom of beginning with an account of the astronomical universe. I should try to see even this earth from the outside, not by the hackneyed insistence of its relative position to the sun, but by some imaginative effort to conceive its remote position for the dehumanised spectator. Only I do not believe in being dehumanised in order to study humanity. I do not believe in dwelling upon distances that are supposed to dwarf the world; I think there is even something a trifle vulgar about this idea

1. “We may scale the heavens and find new stars innumerable, but there is still the new star we have not found—that one on which we were born” (GKC, “In Defence of Planets,” *The Defendant*).

of trying to rebuke spirit by size. And as the first idea is not feasible, that of making the earth a strange planet so as to make it significant, I will not stoop to the other trick of making it a small planet in order to make it insignificant. I would rather insist that we do not even know that it is a planet at all, in the sense in which we know that it is a place; and a very extraordinary place too. That is the note which I wish to strike from the first, if not in the astronomical, then in some more familiar fashion.

One of my first journalistic adventures,² or misadventures, concerned a comment on Grant Allen, who had written a book about the Evolution of the Idea of God.³ I happened to remark that it would be much more interesting if God wrote a book about the evolution of the idea of Grant Allen. And I remember that the editor objected to my remark on the ground that it was blasphemous; which naturally amused me not a little. For the joke of it was, of course, that it never occurred to him to notice the title of the book itself, which really was blasphemous; for it was, when translated into English, "I will show you how this nonsensical notion that there is a God grew up among men." My remark was strictly pious and proper, confessing the divine purpose even in its most seemingly dark or meaningless manifestations. In that hour I learned many things, including the fact that there is something purely acoustic in much of that agnostic sort of reverence. The editor had not seen the point, because in the title of the book the long word came at the beginning and the short word at the end; whereas in my comments the short

2. GKC, *Daily News*, March 14, 1903.

3. Grant Allen (1848–1899), a Canadian, English-educated science writer and novelist. A major promoter of Darwinism, his book *The Evolution of the Idea of God* appeared in 1897.

word came at the beginning and gave him a sort of shock. I have noticed that if you put a word like God into the same sentence with a word like dog, these abrupt and angular words affect people like pistol-shots. Whether you say that God made the dog or the dog made God does not seem to matter; that is only one of the sterile disputations of the too subtle theologians. But so long as you begin with a long word like evolution the rest will roll harmlessly past; very probably the editor had not read the whole of the title, for it is rather a long title and he was rather a busy man.

But this little incident has always lingered in my mind as a sort of parable. Most modern histories of mankind begin with the word evolution, and with a rather wordy exposition of evolution, for much the same reason that operated in this case. There is something slow and soothing and gradual about the word and even about the idea. As a matter of fact, it is not, touching these primary things, a very practical word or a very profitable idea. Nobody can imagine how nothing could turn into something. Nobody can get an inch nearer to it by explaining how something could turn into something else. It is really far more logical to start by saying "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" even if you only mean "In the beginning some unthinkable power began some unthinkable process." For God is by its nature a name of mystery, and nobody ever supposed that man could imagine how a world was created any more than he could create one. But evolution really is mistaken for explanation. It has the fatal quality of leaving on many minds the impression that they do understand it and everything else; just as

many of them live under a sort of illusion that they have read *The Origin of Species*.⁴

But this notion of something smooth and slow, like the ascent of a slope, is a great part of the illusion. It is an illogicality as well as an illusion, for slowness has really nothing to do with the question. An event is not any more intrinsically intelligible or unintelligible because of the pace at which it moves. For a man who does not believe in a miracle, a slow miracle would be just as incredible as a swift one. The Greek witch may have turned sailors to swine with a stroke of the wand.⁵ But to see a naval gentleman of our acquaintance looking a little more like a pig every day, till he ended with four trotters and a curly tail, would not be any more soothing. It might be rather more creepy and uncanny. The medieval wizard may have flown through the air from the top of a tower; but to see an old gentleman walking through the air, in a leisurely and lounging manner, would still seem to call for some explanation. Yet there runs through all the rationalistic treatment of history this curious and confused idea that difficulty is avoided, or even

4. Throughout his writings, Chesterton makes an important distinction between evolution and Darwinism. The observation of evolution in nature was around long before Darwin, but Darwin's book, which provided a "scientific" basis for progressivism, was popularized by Thomas Huxley (1825–1895), who coined the term "agnostic" and used a Darwinian version of evolution not only to explain everything but to explain away such things as religion. Chesterton says, "It is obvious that there is an element of evolution in nature. . . . But the actual effect of Darwinism, on the generation following Darwin, was only a vague fashionable feeling that everything was evolution and that evolution was everything" (GKC, *Illustrated London News*, May 29, 1920). And: "A vague Darwinism has communicated its doubt without fully communicating its doctrine, has succeeded in its attempt to question, while failing in its attempt to explain" (GKC, *Illustrated London News*, August 24, 1912).

5. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' men are turned into swine by the witch Circe.

mystery eliminated, by dwelling on mere delay or on something dilatory in the processes of things. There will be something to be said upon particular examples elsewhere; the question here is the false atmosphere of facility and ease given by the mere suggestion of going slow; the sort of comfort that might be given to a nervous old woman travelling for the first time in a motorcar.

Mr. H.G. Wells has confessed to being a prophet; and in this matter he was a prophet at his own expense. It is curious that his first fairy-tale was a complete answer to his last book of history. *The Time Machine* destroyed in advance all comfortable conclusions founded on the mere relativity of time. In that sublime nightmare the hero saw trees shoot up like green rockets, and vegetation spread visibly like a green conflagration, or the sun shoot across the sky from east to west with the swiftness of a meteor. Yet in his sense these things were quite as natural when they went swiftly; and in our sense they are quite as supernatural when they go slowly. The ultimate question is why they go at all; and anybody who really understands that question will know that it always has been and always will be a religious question; or at any rate a philosophical or metaphysical question. And most certainly he will not think the question answered by some substitution of gradual for abrupt change; or, in other words by a merely relative question of the same story being spun out or rattled rapidly through, as can be done with any story at a cinema by turning a handle.⁶

Now what is needed for these problems of primitive existence is something more like a primitive spirit. In calling up this vision of the first things, I would ask the reader to make with me a sort

6. In H.G. Wells' science fiction tale, the main character in his time machine watches time go by like we would see it in a time-lapse film.

of experiment in simplicity. And by simplicity I do not mean stupidity, but rather the sort of clarity that sees things like life rather than words like evolution. For this purpose it would really be better to turn the handle of the Time Machine a little more quickly and see the grass growing and the trees springing up into the sky, if that experiment could contract and concentrate and make vivid the upshot of the whole affair. What we know, in a sense in which we know nothing else, is that the trees and the grass did grow and that a number of extraordinary things do in fact happen; that queer creatures support themselves in the empty air by beating it with fans of various fantastic shapes; that other queer creatures steer themselves about alive under a load of mighty waters; that other queer creatures walk about on four legs, and that the queerest creature of all walks about on two. These are things and not theories; and compared with them evolution and the atom and even the solar system are merely theories. The matter here is one of history and not of philosophy; so that it need only be noted that no philosopher denies that a mystery still attaches to the two great transitions: the origin of the universe itself and the origin of the principle of life itself. Most philosophers have the enlightenment to add that a third mystery attaches to the origin of man himself. In other words, a third bridge was built across a third abyss of the unthinkable when there came into the world what we call reason and what we call will. Man is not merely an evolution but rather a revolution. That he has a backbone or other parts upon a similar pattern to birds and fishes is an obvious fact, whatever be the meaning of the fact. But if we attempt to regard him, as it were, as a quadruped standing on his hind legs, we shall find what follows far more fantastic and subversive than if he were standing on his head.

I will take one example to serve for an introduction to the story of man. It illustrates what I mean by saying that a certain childish directness is needed to see the truth about the childhood of the world. It illustrates what I mean by saying that a mixture of popular science and journalistic jargon have confused the facts about the first things, so that we cannot see which of them really comes first. It illustrates, though only in one convenient illustration, all that I mean by the necessity of seeing the sharp differences that give its shape to history, instead of being submerged in all these generalisations about slowness and sameness. For we do indeed require, in Mr. Wells's phrase, an outline of history.⁷ But we may venture to say, in Mr. Mantalini's phrase, that this evolutionary history has no outline or is a demd outline.⁸ But, above all, it illustrates what I mean by saying that the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one.

Today all our novels and newspapers will be found swarming with numberless allusions to a popular character called a Cave-Man. He seems to be quite familiar to us, not only as a public character but as a private character. His psychology is seriously taken into account in psychological fiction and psychological medicine. So far as I can understand, his chief occupation in life was knocking his wife about, or treating women in general with what is, I

7. The title of H.G. Wells' book, to which this book was written as a rebuttal.

8. Mr. Mantalini is a character in Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, and utters this bit of colorful dialogue: "'Demmit!' exclaimed Mr. Mantalini, opening his eyes at the sound of Ralph's voice, 'it is a horrid reality. She is sitting there before me. There is the graceful outline of her form; it cannot be mistaken—there is nothing like it. The two countesses had no outlines at all, and the dowager's was a demd outline. Why is she so excruciatingly beautiful that I cannot be angry with her, even now?'"

believe, known in the world of the film as “rough stuff.” I have never happened to come upon the evidence for this idea; and I do not know on what primitive diaries or prehistoric divorce-reports it is founded. Nor, as I have explained elsewhere, have I ever been able to see the probability of it, even considered a priori. We are always told without any explanation or authority that primitive man waved a club and knocked the woman down before he carried her off. But on every animal analogy, it would seem an almost morbid modesty and reluctance, on the part of the lady, always to insist on being knocked down before consenting to be carried off. And I repeat that I can never comprehend why, when the male was so very rude, the female should have been so very refined. The cave-man may have been a brute, but there is no reason why he should have been more brutal than the brutes. And the loves of the giraffes and the river romances of the hippopotami are effected without any of this preliminary fracas or shindy. The cave-man may have been no better than the cave-bear; but the child she-bear, so famous in hymnology,⁹ is not trained with any such bias for spinsterhood. In short these details of the domestic life of the cave puzzle me upon either the revolutionary or the static hypothesis; and in any case I should like to look into the evidence for them; but unfortunately I have never been able to find it. But the curious thing is this: that while ten thousand tongues of more or less scientific or literary gossip seemed to be talking at once about this unfortunate fellow, under the title of cave-man, the one connection in which it is really relevant and sensible to talk about him as the cave-man has been comparatively neglected. People have used this

9. The hymn “Gladly the Cross I Bear” is fodder for a joke about the cross-eyed bear named Gladly.

loose term in twenty loose ways, but they have never even looked at their own term for what could really be learned from it.

In fact, people have been interested in everything about the cave-man except what he did in the cave. Now there does happen to be some real evidence of what he did in the cave. It is little enough, like all the prehistoric evidence, but it is concerned with the real cave-man and his cave and not the literary cave-man and his club. And it will be valuable to our sense of reality to consider quite simply what that real evidence is, and not to go beyond it. What was found in the cave was not the club, the horrible gory club notched with the number of women it had knocked on the head. The cave was not a Bluebeard's Chamber¹⁰ filled with the skeletons of slaughtered wives; it was not filled with female skulls all arranged in rows and all cracked like eggs. It was something quite unconnected, one way or the other, with all the modern phrases and philosophical implications and literary rumours which confuse the whole question for us. And if we wish to see as it really is this authentic glimpse of the morning of the world, it will be far better to conceive even the story of its discovery as some such legend of the land of morning. It would be far better to tell the tale of what was really found as simply as the tale of heroes finding the Golden Fleece or the Gardens of the Hesperides,¹¹ if we could so escape from a fog of controversial theories into the clear colours and clean-cut outlines of such a

10. Bluebeard. Not exactly Mr. Right. In the folktale about him, he has a habit of murdering his wives and keeping their remains in a hidden chamber in his castle.

11. In Greek mythology, the Golden Fleece was the quest of the hero Jason and his Argonauts; the Garden of the Hesperides was the dwelling place of beautiful nymphs who guarded an orchard that grew golden apples which granted immortality.

dawn. The old epic poets at least knew how to tell a story, possibly a tall story but never a twisted story, never a story twisted out of its own shape to fit theories and philosophies invented centuries afterwards. It would be well if modern investigators could describe their discoveries in the bald narrative style of the earliest travellers, and without any of these long allusive words that are full of irrelevant implications and suggestion. Then we might realise exactly what we do know about the cave-man, or at any rate about the cave.

A priest and a boy entered sometime ago a hollow in the hills and passed into a sort of subterranean tunnel that led into a labyrinth of such sealed and secret corridors of rock. They crawled through cracks that seemed almost impassible, they crept through tunnels that might have been made for moles, they dropped into holes as hopeless as wells, they seemed to be burying themselves alive seven times over beyond the hope of resurrection. This is but the commonplace of all such courageous exploration; but what is needed here is someone who shall put such stories in the primary light, in which they are not commonplace. There is, for instance, something strangely symbolic in the accident that the first intruders into that sunken world were a priest and a boy, the type of the antiquity and of the youth of the world. But here I am even more concerned with the symbolism of the boy than with that of the priest.¹² Nobody who remembers boyhood needs to be told what it

12. Not to ruin a good story, but we have not found this account of a boy and priest discovering cave paintings. Chesterton may be confusing it with a similar story of the discovery of the famous Altamira cave drawings in Spain. In 1879, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, a lawyer and amateur geologist, was exploring a previously hidden cave with his twelve-year-old daughter Maria. She was the one who actually first saw the drawings, which were made with ochre and were still vividly red. Primitive tools and bones of extinct animals were also found in the cave, but

might be to a boy to enter like Peter Pan under a roof of the roots of all the trees and go deeper and deeper, till he reach what William Morris¹³ called the very roots of the mountains. Suppose somebody, with that simple and unspoilt realism that is a part of innocence, to pursue that journey to its end, not for the sake of what he could deduce or demonstrate in some dusty magazine controversy, but simply for the sake of what he could see. What he did see at last was a cavern so far from the light of day that it might have been the legendary Domdaniel cavern that was under the floor of the sea.¹⁴ This secret chamber of rock, when illuminated after its long night of unnumbered ages, revealed on its walls large and sprawling outlines diversified with coloured earths; and when they followed the lines of them they recognised, across that vast void of ages, the movement and the gesture of a man's hand. They were drawings or paintings of animals; and they were drawn or painted not only by a man but by an artist. Under whatever archaic limitations, they showed that love of the long sweeping or the long wavering line which any man who has ever drawn or tried to draw will recognise; and about which no artist will allow himself to be contradicted by any scientist. They showed the experimental and adventurous spirit of the artist, the spirit that does not avoid but attempts difficult things; as where the draughtsman had represented the action of

some scientists were skeptical because the drawings themselves were not as "primitive" as they thought they should be. They didn't fit the narrative. However, subsequent discoveries in other caves throughout Europe confirmed their authenticity and confirmed that cavemen were real artists.

13. William Morris (1834–1896), artist and poet who wrote the fantasy romance novel *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889). He also fits well into this chapter because he designed wallpaper; that is to say, his art covered the walls.

14. A fabled undersea hall from *The Arabian Nights* that was the meeting place for sorcerers and witches.

the stag when he swings his head clean round and noses towards his tail, an action familiar enough in the horse. But there are many modern animal-painters who would set themselves something of a task in rendering it truly. In this and twenty other details it is clear that the artist had watched animals with a certain interest and presumably a certain pleasure. In that sense it would seem that he was not only an artist but a naturalist; the sort of naturalist who is really natural.

Now it is needless to note, except in passing, that there is nothing whatever in the atmosphere of that cave to suggest the bleak and pessimistic atmosphere of that journalistic cave of the winds, that blows and bellows about us with countless echoes concerning the cave-man. So far as any human character can be hinted at by such traces of the past, that human character is quite human and even humane. It is certainly not the ideal of an inhuman character, like the abstraction invoked in popular science. When novelists and educationists and psychologists of all sorts talk about the cave-man, they never conceive him in connection with anything that is really in the cave. When the realist of the sex novel writes, "Red sparks danced in Dagmar Doubledick's brain; he felt the spirit of the cave-man rising within him," the novelist's readers would be very much disappointed if Dagmar only went off and drew large pictures of cows on the drawing-room wall. When the psychoanalyst writes to a patient, "The submerged instincts of the cave-man are doubtless prompting you to gratify a violent impulse," he does not refer to the impulse to paint in watercolours; or to make conscientious studies of how cattle swing their heads when they graze. Yet we do know for a fact that the cave-man did these mild and innocent things; and we have not the most minute speck of evidence

that he did any of the violent and ferocious things. In other words the cave-man as commonly presented to us is simply a myth or rather a muddle; for a myth has at least an imaginative outline of truth. The whole of the current way of talking is simply a confusion and a misunderstanding, founded on no sort of scientific evidence and valued only as an excuse for a very modern mood of anarchy. If any gentleman wants to knock a woman about, he can surely be a cad without taking away the character of the cave-man, about whom we know next to nothing except what we can gather from a few harmless and pleasing pictures on a wall.

But this is not the point about the pictures or the particular moral here to be drawn from them. That moral is something much larger and simpler, so large and simple that when it is first stated it will sound childish. And indeed it is in the highest sense childish; and that is why I have in this apologue in some sense seen it through the eyes of a child. It is the biggest of all the facts really facing the boy in the cavern; and is perhaps too big to be seen. If the boy was one of the flock of the priest, it may be presumed that he had been trained in a certain quality of common sense; that common sense that often comes to us in the form of tradition. In that case he would simply recognise the primitive man's work as the work of a man, interesting but in no way incredible in being primitive. He would see what was there to see; and he would not be tempted into seeing what was not there, by any evolutionary excitement or fashionable speculation. If he had heard of such things he would admit, of course, that the speculations might be true and were not incompatible with the facts that were true. The artist may have had another side to his character besides that which he has alone left on record in his works of art. The primitive man may have taken a

pleasure in beating women as well as in drawing animals; all we can say is that the drawings record the one but not the other. It may be true that when the cave-man's finished jumping on his mother, or his wife as the case may be, he loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling, and also to watch the deer as they come down to drink at the brook. These things are not impossible, but they are irrelevant. The common sense of the child could confine itself to learning from the facts what the facts have to teach; and the pictures in the cave are very nearly all the facts there are. So far as that evidence goes, the child would be justified in assuming that a man had represented animals with rock and red ochre for the same reason as he himself was in the habit of trying to represent animals with charcoal and red chalk. The man had drawn a stag just as the child had drawn a horse; because it was fun. The man had drawn a stag with his head turned as the child had drawn a pig with his eyes shut; because it was difficult. The child and the man, being both human, would be united by the brotherhood of men; and the brotherhood of men is even nobler when it bridges the abyss of ages than when it bridges only the chasm of class. But anyhow he would see no evidence of the cave-man of crude evolutionism; because there is none to be seen. If somebody told him that the pictures had all been drawn by St. Francis of Assisi out of pure and saintly love of animals, there would be nothing in the cave to contradict it.

Indeed I once knew a lady who half-humorously suggested that the cave was a creche, in which the babies were put to be specially safe, and that coloured animals were drawn on the walls to amuse them; very much as diagrams of elephants and giraffes adorn a modern infant school. And though this was but a jest, it does draw attention to some of the other assumptions that we make only

too readily. The pictures do not prove even that the cave-men lived in caves, any more than the discovery of a wine-cellar in Balham (long after that suburb had been destroyed by human or divine wrath) would prove that the Victorian middle classes lived entirely underground. The cave might have had a special purpose like the cellar; it might have been a religious shrine or a refuge in war or the meeting-place of a secret society or all sorts of things. But it is quite true that its artistic decoration has much more of the atmosphere of a nursery than of any of these nightmares of anarchical fury and fear. I have conceived a child as standing in the cave; and it is easy to conceive any child, modern or immeasurably remote, as making a living gesture as if to pat the painted beasts upon the wall. In that gesture there is a foreshadowing, as we shall see later, of another cavern and another child.

But suppose the boy had not been taught by a priest but by a professor, by one of the professors who simplify the relation of men and beasts to a mere evolutionary variation. Suppose the boy saw himself, with the same simplicity and sincerity, as a mere Mowgli¹⁵ running with the pack of nature and roughly indistinguishable from the rest save by a relative and recent variation. What would be for him the simplest lesson of that strange stone picture-book? After all, it would come back to this; that he had dug very deep and found the place where a man had drawn the picture of a reindeer. But he would dig a good deal deeper before he found a place where a reindeer had drawn a picture of a man. That sounds like a truism, but in this connection it is really a very tremendous truth. He might descend to depths unthinkable, he might sink into sunken

15. A native boy reared by wolves in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

continents as strange as remote stars, he might find himself in the inside of the world as far from men as the other side of the moon; he might see in those cold chasms or colossal terraces of stone, traced in the faint hieroglyphic of the fossil, the ruins of lost dynasties of biological life, rather like the ruins of successive creations and separate universes than the stages in the story of one. He would find the trail of monsters blindly developing in directions outside all our common imagery of fish and bird; groping and grasping and touching life with every extravagant elongation of horn and tongue and tentacle; growing a forest of fantastic caricatures of the claw and the fin and the finger. But nowhere would he find one finger that had traced one significant line upon the sand; nowhere one claw that had even begun to scratch the faint suggestion of a form. To all appearance, the thing would be as unthinkable in all those countless cosmic variations of forgotten aeons as it would be in the beasts and birds before our eyes. The child would no more expect to see it than to see the cat scratch on the wall a vindictive caricature of the dog. The childish common sense would keep the most evolutionary child from expecting to see anything like that; yet in the traces of the rude and recently evolved ancestors of humanity he would have seen exactly that. It must surely strike him as strange that men so remote from him should be so near, and that beasts so near to him should be so remote. To his simplicity it must seem at least odd that he could not find any trace of the beginning of any arts among any animals. That is the simplest lesson to learn in the cavern of the coloured pictures; only it is too simple to be learnt. It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brutes in kind and not in degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and

that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. Art is the signature of man.

That is the sort of simple truth with which a story of the beginnings ought really to begin. The evolutionist stands staring in the painted cavern at the things that are too large to be seen and too simple to be understood. He tries to deduce all sorts of other indirect and doubtful things from the details of the pictures, because he cannot see the primary significance of the whole; thin and theoretical deductions about the absence of religion or the presence of superstition; about tribal government and hunting and human sacrifice and heaven knows what. In the next chapter I shall try to trace in a little more detail the much disputed question about these prehistoric origins of human ideas and especially of the religious idea. Here I am only taking this one case of the cave as a sort of symbol of the simpler sort of truth with which the story ought to start. When all is said, the main fact that the record of the reindeer men attests, along with all other records, is that the reindeer man could draw and the reindeer could not. If the reindeer man was as much an animal as the reindeer, it was all the more extraordinary that he could do what all other animals could not. If he was an ordinary product of biological growth, like any other beast or bird, then it is all the more extraordinary that he was not in the least like any other beast or bird. He seems rather more supernatural as a natural product than as a supernatural one.

But I have begun this story in the cave, like the cave of the speculations of Plato,¹⁶ because it is a sort of model of the mistake of

16. Plato's Cave is a famous allegory from *The Republic*, which he uses to explain the relationship between a misleading and unfulfilling existence (which

merely evolutionary introductions and prefaces. It is useless to begin by saying that everything was slow and smooth and a mere matter of development and degree. For in the plain matter like the pictures there is in fact not a trace of any such development or degree. Monkeys did not begin pictures and men finish them. Pithecanthropus¹⁷ did not draw a reindeer badly and Homo Sapiens¹⁸ draw it well. The higher animals did not draw better and better portraits; the dog did not paint better in his best period than in his early bad manner as a jackal; the wild horse was not an Impressionist and the racehorse a Post-Impressionist.¹⁹ All we can say of this notion of

the material world often is) and a more real and truly happy existence (which is found in something more immaterial, especially ideas themselves, which physical things only hint at). Plato describes a strange scene of lifelong prisoners chained deep inside a cave and forced to stare at a wall, against which are cast shadow puppets that mimic objects of the real world. The unknowing captives have come to mistake these images for reality. But one prisoner—a philosopher—breaks out of this deceptive prison, crawls out of the cave, and after being initially blinded by the light of the sun, eventually becomes accustomed to seeing how things truly are and how much more is offered by a life of truth. Desiring to share this liberating experience, the escaped lover of wisdom journeys back down into the cave and tells his still incarcerated brethren that the shadows that enthrall them have been deceiving them into living a miserable lie. They will likely protest such a claim out of their ignorance, perhaps even driving them to kill this troublesome philosopher—which is what happened to Socrates.

17. A very scientific sounding name to describe apelike prehumans. Most of the artifacts connected to these creatures, such as Java Man and Peking Man, are either incomplete or completely lost or turned out to be from chimpanzees, and so the name Pithecanthropus has been retired with much less fanfare than accompanied its debut.

18. The genus species to which our readers—and everyone else—belong. It literally means “the man who is wise,” and we should accept this compliment in our biological classification, even if we don’t always deserve it.

19. Impressionism (think Monet) and Post-Impressionism (think Van Gogh) are two movements of art that Chesterton lived through and neither of which he cared for because in his mind they represented the breakdown of art,

reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot even talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature. In other words, every sane sort of history must begin with man as man, a thing standing absolute and alone. How he came there, or indeed how anything else came there, is a thing for theologians and philosophers and scientists and not for historians. But an excellent test case of this isolation and mystery is the matter of the impulse of art. This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature. Nothing in that sense could be made in any other image but the image of man. But the truth is so true that, even in the absence of any religious belief, it must be assumed in the form of some moral or metaphysical principle. In the next chapter we shall see how this principle applies to all the historical hypotheses and evolutionary ethics now in fashion; to the origins of tribal government or mythological belief. But the clearest and most convenient example to start with is this popular one of what the cave-man really did in his cave. It means that somehow or other a new thing had appeared in the cavernous night of nature, a mind that is like a mirror. It is like a mirror because it is truly a thing of reflection. It is like a mirror because in it alone all the other shapes can be seen like shining shadows in a vision. Above all, it is like a mirror because it is the only thing of its kind. Other things may resemble it or resemble each other in various

the blurring of the lines, the loss of definition, the beginning of subjectivism and self-indulgence. He predicted that the decay in art would not stop because every boundary would be transgressed. "Impressionism . . . is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe" (GKC, "The Criminals Chase the Police," *The Man Who Was Thursday*).

ways; other things may excel it or excel each other in various ways; just as in the furniture of a room a table may be round like a mirror or a cupboard may be larger than a mirror. But the mirror is the only thing that can contain them all. Man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things; man is the image of God. These are the only real lessons to be learnt in the cave, and it is time to leave it for the open road.

It will be well in this place, however, to sum up once and for all what is meant by saying that man is at once the exception to everything and the mirror and the measure of all things. But to see man as he is, it is necessary once more to keep close to that simplicity that can clear itself of accumulated clouds of sophistry. The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot even 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. Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thoughts from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame. Whether we praise these things as natural to man or abuse them as artificial in nature, they remain

in the same sense unique. This is realised by the whole popular instinct called religion, until disturbed by pedants, especially the laborious pedants of the Simple Life. The most sophistical of all sophists are gymnosophists.²⁰

It is not natural to see man as a natural product. It is not common sense to call a man a common object of the country or the seashore. It is not seeing straight to see him as an animal. It is not sane. It sins against the light; against that broad daylight of proportion which is the principle of all reality. It is reached by stretching a point, by making out a case, by artificially selecting a certain light and shade, by bringing into prominence the lesser or lower things which may happen to be similar. The solid thing standing in the sunlight, the thing we can walk round and see from all sides, is quite different. It is also quite extraordinary, and the more sides we see of it the more extraordinary it seems. It is emphatically not a thing that follows or flows naturally from anything else. If we imagine that an inhuman or impersonal intelligence could have felt from the first the general nature of the non-human world sufficiently to see that things would evolve in whatever way they did evolve, there would have been nothing whatever in all that natural world to prepare such a mind for such an unnatural novelty. To such a mind, man would most certainly not have seemed something like one herd out of a hundred herds finding richer pasture, or one swallow out of a hundred swallows making a summer under a strange sky. It would not be in the same scale and scarcely in the same dimension. We might as truly say that it would not be in the same universe. It

20. Translation: "The most absurd of the frauds who claim to be intellectuals are the ones who seriously try to justify nudism." Chesterton may have coined the term "gymnosophist."

would be more like seeing one cow out of a hundred cows suddenly jump over the moon or one pig out of a hundred pigs grow wings in a flash and fly. It would not be a question of the cattle finding their own grazing-ground but of their building their own cattle-sheds, not a question of one swallow making a summer but of his making a summer-house. For the very fact that birds do build nests is one of those similarities that sharpen the startling difference. The very fact that a bird can get as far as building a nest, and cannot get any farther, proves that he has not a mind as man has a mind; it proves it more completely than if he built nothing at all. If he built nothing at all, he might possibly be a philosopher of the Quietist or Buddhistic school, indifferent to all but the mind within. But when he builds as he does build and is satisfied and sings aloud with satisfaction, then we know there is really an invisible veil like a pane of glass between him and us, like the window on which a bird will beat in vain. But suppose our abstract onlooker saw one of the birds begin to build as men build. Suppose in an incredibly short space of time there were seven styles of architecture for one style of nest. Suppose the bird carefully selected forked twigs and pointed leaves to express the piercing piety of Gothic, but turned to broad foliage and black mud when he sought in a darker mood to call up the heavy columns of Bel and Ashtaroth;²¹ making his nest indeed one of the hanging gardens of Babylon. Suppose the bird made little clay statues of birds celebrated in letters or politics and

21. Bel, or Baal, was a sun god or a war god and was a chief deity of Middle Eastern tribes such as the Canaanites, who were the Old Testament enemies of the Israelites. Ashtaroth, or Asherah, was a moon goddess, the main female deity worshiped by the Syrians. Both deities were connected to idol worship, and both names, or variants of them, show up in later demonology, and will show up later in this book.

stuck them up in front of the nest. Suppose that one bird out of a thousand birds began to do one of the thousand things that man had already done even in the morning of the world; and we can be quite certain that the onlooker would not regard such a bird as a mere evolutionary variety of the other birds; he would regard it as a very fearful wildfowl indeed; possibly as a bird of ill-omen, certainly as an omen. That bird would tell the augurs, not of something that would happen, but of something that had happened. That something would be the appearance of a mind with a new dimension of depth; a mind like that of man. If there be no God, no other mind could conceivably have foreseen it.

Now, as a matter of fact, there is not a shadow of evidence that this thing was evolved at all. There is not a particle of proof that this transition came slowly, or even that it came naturally. In a strictly scientific sense, we simply know nothing whatever about how it grew, or whether it grew, or what it is. There may be a broken trail of stones and bones faintly suggesting the development of the human body. There is nothing even faintly suggesting such a development of this human mind. It was not and it was; we know not in what instant or in what infinity of years. Something happened; and it has all the appearance of a transaction outside time. It has therefore nothing to do with history in the ordinary sense. The historian must take it or something like it for granted; it is not his business as a historian to explain it. But if he cannot explain it as a historian, he will not explain it as a biologist. In neither case is there any disgrace to him in accepting it without explaining it; for it is a reality, and history and biology deal with realities. He is quite justified in calmly confronting the pig with wings and the cow that jumped over the moon, merely because they have happened. He

can reasonably accept man as a freak, because he accepts man as a fact. He can be perfectly comfortable in a crazy and disconnected world, or in a world that can produce such a crazy and disconnected thing. For reality is a thing in which we can all repose, even if it hardly seems related to anything else. The thing is there; and that is enough for most of us. But if we do indeed want to know how it can conceivably have come there, if we do indeed wish to see it related realistically to other things, if we do insist on seeing it evolved before our very eyes from an environment nearer to its own nature, then assuredly it is to very different things that we must go. We must stir very strange memories and return to very simple dreams, if we desire some origin that can make man other than a monster. We shall have discovered very different causes before he becomes a creature of causation; and invoked other authority to turn him into something reasonable, or even into anything probable. That way lies all that is at once awful and familiar and forgotten, with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms. We can accept man as a fact, if we are content with an unexplained fact. We can accept him as an animal, if we can live with a fabulous animal. But if we must have sequence and necessity, then indeed we must provide a prelude and crescendo of mounting miracles, that ushered in with unthinkable thunders in all the seven heavens of another order, a man may be an ordinary thing.²²

22. This last sentence has befuddled readers, including myself, for years, until I finally figured out there was an extra word in it that rendered it almost incomprehensible. I have removed the word. I'm not going to tell you what it was. Even so, the sentence is still a bit difficult to understand, and so I offer this paraphrase: "But if we must have evolution, it must be a series of miracles, even to achieve the being which we know as ordinary man."

Commentary

The Man in the Cave

“Mr. Chesterton has a quite unusual power of seeing the obvious, and it is quite true that many learned men seem to have lost that power.”²³ So wrote an anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* in October 1925 upon the publication of *The Everlasting Man*. But explaining the obvious to those educated folks who have lost track of it, as well as to those uneducated folk who are intimidated and held hostage by the learned, is a gigantic task. For the first part of his thesis, Chesterton has to explain something that every man, woman, and child should already know and be able to observe: that man is uniquely different from the other animals. But that conclusion is “contrary to received opinion.” And anything contrary to received opinion is called a paradox.

According to the prevailing orthodoxy of the early twentieth century, the story of mankind begins in a cave. So Chesterton begins there. But his cave is not inhabited by hairy, naked brutes who beat up the girl brutes in order to charm them. There is no evidence to support that narrative, even though that is the narrative being taught and published. There is almost no evidence at all for any of the caveman’s behavior. There is really only one piece of evidence: the drawings that are still on the walls of the cave. Drawings *of* animals—not drawings *by* animals. None of those have ever

23. “The Everlasting Man,” *G.K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*.

been found. Animals have no autographs. “Art is the signature of man.” Chesterton has thrown a knock-out punch in the first round. He has already proved the first part of his thesis. Everything else in part 1 will simply be used to set up part 2.

Chesterton’s genius in starting the story in the cave will become evident as the book unfolds. Already the classical student can make comparisons to Plato’s Cave. Already we are emerging from darkness to light. But his emphasis on the drawings, on the art, and even on the discovery of the art is also purposeful—the significance of the signature. The signature of man. He describes some ancient cave drawings being discovered by a boy and a priest. As explained in the footnotes, we don’t know of any account of a boy and priest finding these drawings, and he may be thinking of a very similar story involving an amateur geologist and his young daughter discovering cave drawings in Spain just a few decades before this book was written. He may be referring to an account we just haven’t found, but the fact is, such cave drawings are still being discovered after being hidden for millennia. A remarkable film that captures the beauty and mystery of recently discovered cave drawings is Werner Herzog’s stunning documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010).

But for Chesterton’s purpose, the moral of the story is the childlike sense of wonder in the discovery of the old thing as a new thing. He gets us to see, through the eyes of a child, not just the drawing but the animal depicted. It would be the source of great excitement for both the adult and the child to make such a discovery—the adult for what he knows, and the child for what she doesn’t know. It is that magical combination of wisdom and innocence, seen in such comic pairs as Don Quixote and Sancho

Panza, and Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller. Assuming it was the child that first entered the cave, Chesterton says it is good that innocence should be at the front, and wisdom right behind it.²⁴ Common sense is what the innocent know, never having lost it. It is what the wise have to regain to see it again, as if for the first time. “The common sense of the child could confine itself to learning from the facts what the facts have to teach; and the pictures in the cave are very nearly all the facts there are.” Unless you become like a little child, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3).

Chesterton himself had a fondness for drawing on the wall, which probably did little to endear himself to his future mother-in-law when she showed him her new wallpaper, and he immediately pulled a crayon from his pocket and drew a picture on it. Perhaps this was innocence, but it may not have been wisdom. “Lying in bed,” he wrote in the opening sentence of one of his most famous essays, “would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience if only one had a coloured pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling.” That amusing paragraph ends with this sentence: “To that purpose, indeed, the white ceiling would be of the greatest possible use; in fact it is the only use I think of a white ceiling being put to.”²⁵ Which is probably how he felt about the new wallpaper in his fiancée’s house. And how the caveman felt about the cave wall. This blank space would be improved with a picture.

There is another story about a child accompanying a priest that reveals innocence and wisdom and entering the kingdom of

24. “It is right that knowledge should be the servant and innocence the master” (GKC, “Pickwick Papers,” *Appreciations*).

25. GKC, “On Lying in Bed,” *In Defense of Sanity*.

heaven. The renowned actor Sir Alec Guinness once portrayed G.K. Chesterton's famous fictional sleuth Father Brown in the 1954 film *The Detective*. Like most attempts to bring Father Brown to the screen, it was less than satisfactory because screenwriters for some reason think they can improve on Chesterton's plot and dialogue by dispensing with them altogether. However, most people who have seen this movie have been as pleased with Guinness' portrayal of Chesterton's popular priest as they have been frustrated with the awful screenplay. Yet it turns out that this rather forgettable film was the most important role that Guinness ever played. As he explained in his autobiography, *Blessings in Disguise*, he was returning to his hotel one evening when filming on location in Burgundy, still in costume as Father Brown:

I hadn't gone far when I heard scampering footsteps and a piping voice calling, "Mon père!" My hand was seized by a boy of seven or eight, who clutched it tightly, swung it and kept up a non-stop prattle. He was full of excitement, hops, skips and jumps, but never let go of me. I didn't dare speak in case my excruciating French should scare him. Although I was a total stranger he obviously took me for a priest and so to be trusted. Suddenly with a "Bonsoir, mon père," and a hurried sideways sort of bow, he disappeared through a hole in a hedge. He had had a happy, reassuring walk home, and I was left with an odd calm sense of elation. Continuing my walk I reflected that a Church which could inspire such a confidence in a child, making its priests, even when unknown, so easily approachable could not be as

scheming and creepy as so often made out. I began to shake off my long-taught, long-absorbed prejudices.²⁶

His conversion to the Catholic faith followed shortly thereafter.

26. Alec Guinness, "Quintessence of Dust," *Blessings in Disguise*. There may be some readers who, in light of the sexual abuse scandal, are immediately put off by this episode. But we should be reminded what the normal looks like and not be dragged down by the abnormal. Alec Guinness lost his prejudices with this experience. And it helped lead him to the Catholic Church.