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Introduction

ALTHOUGH G. K. CHESTERTON (1874–1936) died many years ago, many people still consider him a spokesman for sanity wherever fads, fickleness, and unreason abound. And he remains an advocate for wholeness in a mysterious world of philosophical fragments and linguistic slippages. Amidst an overwhelming deluge of opinions, a consistent call may still be discerned in his work: it is an exuberant, urgent call for the reader to wake up from a world enveloped in sleep, custom, and nightmare.¹ As a participant in the democracy of the dead, he haunts the world, not with dread or fear, but with analogies, paradoxes, humor, and stories. It is by his decisive commitment to joy rather than anxiety or radical indecision that he disturbs our slumber of habit.

In Chesterton's view, whatever sacred spectacles we choose to look through, we need to be and stay alert.² We should refuse to "let the eye [of our understanding] rest."³ Instead, we must "exercise the eye until it learns to see the startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted fence"; we need to take up the call to "be ocular athletes."⁴ As the metaphor implies, such ocular athleticism would seem to require at least some training. The idea of taking anything at face value must be radically called into question.

1. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men*, 29; Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 137.

2. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, v-vi.

4. *Ibid.*

Chesterton persistently encourages us to find a clear view of things.⁵ This is so important because the world is almost always “in a permanent danger of being misjudged” or overlooked by us given the specific limitations of our perceptual awareness.⁶ We are all prone to “not seeing things as they are.”⁷ Still, as straightforward as it may seem that we should endeavor to have a clearer perception of things, a few important questions must be asked: How is it possible to achieve what Chesterton would regard as a suitable level of perceptual perspicacity? What, in his mind, is required for us to be competent ocular athletes? What does it even mean to “see things as they are”?⁸ Is such a thing even possible? Such questions are at the heart of this book, which aims to outline what Chesterton can teach us about reading, interpreting, and participating in the drama of meaning as it unfolds before us in words and in the world.

As the above already implies, I plan here to consider Chesterton’s work in the light of philosophical hermeneutics, which is the intellectual discipline that seeks to interrogate and appreciate the conditions and coordinates of (the possibility of) interpretive understanding. I plan to do this while keeping in mind the basic hermeneutic assumption that being—our being as ourselves, our being with other beings, and our being as participating in Being—is always mediated by language, which is a sacrament of this participation. To be is to be unequivocally immersed in language and a world of presences and absences, revelations and concealments, realities and resemblances. Finding meaning—understanding and interpreting—must therefore involve reflecting back on that immersion without assuming any sort of naïvely oblivious “hermeneutics of immediacy.”⁹

Philosophical hermeneutics is particularly associated with the ideas introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in his masterwork *Truth and Method*, which deals with the elements of a philosophical hermeneutics. Broadly speaking, philosophical hermeneutics has a threefold aim: firstly, it seeks to understand what any given text means or could mean, and thus considers the philosophical rather than purely methodological parameters of the interpretive experience; secondly, it contemplates the relationships between author, text, reader, and world, and especially tries to navigate how each one of these can or should be emphasized or downplayed in the process of interpretation; then, thirdly, it aims to further question the integration

5. Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, xiii.

6. Chesterton, *The Defendant*, 4–5.

7. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 68.

8. Chesterton, *Selected Works*, 974; Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, 47.

9. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 4.

of an interpreted text into life. It builds upon the existential assumption that we are all perpetually in a process of reading and translating the world around us into personal, relatable terms, as well as negotiating its meanings; we are always considering not just what things mean in general, but what they mean for us. Thus, philosophical hermeneutics considers factors such as the hermeneutic circle, whereby meaning is always understood through a dynamic dance between part and whole—also expressed sometimes as the idea that understanding is preceded by an anticipatory structure and confronted via various conscious and unconscious presuppositions. It also incorporates the notion of the hermeneutic spiral, which sees thought turn back to look at itself in the process of deepening experiential understanding.

Hermeneutics takes into account the part played by dialectic in developing our outlooks, as well as the ways in which dialectic (as the mediation of otherness into the same) may fail us when adopted as a strict adherence to the principle of creating a synthesis from antithetical components. Other factors are also important, such as our current horizons of understanding and our attitudes, which are guided by such things as authority and tradition.¹⁰ However, these aforementioned hermeneutic considerations are rooted in a very particular tradition of Continental Philosophy that, it is quite safe to say, had nothing to do with the development of Chesterton's thinking. Chesterton was simply unaware of the developments in hermeneutic philosophy of thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and also had no knowledge of the work of his distant contemporary Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Gadamer was thirty-six when Chesterton died, and still twenty-four years away from seeing *Truth and Method* completed. Most obviously, the hermeneutic tradition before Chesterton's time was distinctly German and Chesterton felt no real compulsion to explore that nation's discourses at length.

Nevertheless, if philosophical hermeneutics encourages us, as Terry Eagleton contends, “to be suspicious of the glaringly self-evident,”¹¹ then perhaps it is fair to suggest that Chesterton may be considered something of a hermeneutic philosopher, albeit one whose suspicion of the self-evident included a strong trend towards a positive astonishment at the non-self-evident existence of everything. Chesterton unremittingly defied and redefined the supposed limits of the apparently obvious. He sought meaning as a multifaceted jewel to be admired from every angle.¹² And his writings consistently demonstrate a profound interpretive awareness in its

10. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

11. Eagleton, *After Theory*, 53.

12. Lauer, *G. K. Chesterton*, 13.

circumambulation of both interpretation and application in the pursuit of understanding. This is true regarding his approach to his own work, as well as his reading of the work of others. Thus, inasmuch as he is thought of as a writer, it is reasonable to also regard him as a reader in the hermeneutic sense of the word: he demonstrates a constant and self-critical process of engaging with and elucidating texts. In fact, I think that understanding him as a reader in this way allows for better understanding him as a writer and communicator.

Reading was often as much a physical act as it was an intellectual one for Chesterton—a fact that is explored much more fully in the pages that follow. Digby d'Avigdor recalls Chesterton as a boy at St. Paul's: "I always have a vision of him wandering around the corridors with one of his disreputable books. His Greek primer all dog-eared, tattered, covered with drawings of goblins, all over the text as well as in the margins. The masters would say, 'Chesterton, Chesterton, have you *no care* for books?'"¹³ Of the books that Chesterton covered with his drawings, perhaps none is more famous than his copy of T. K. Arnold's *A Practical Introduction to Latin Prose, Part II*, which is housed at the Chesterton Library at the Oxford Oratory today. That book is described in Maisie Ward's biography as having been "withdrawn from him . . . because it was drawn all over with devils."¹⁴ This is not precisely true, though; while the book is certainly covered with drawings, not a single one is of a devil. There are many swords and swordsmen, horses, faces, and animals—bats, dragons, a dog, and a fish—but no devils. Chesterton reserved his drawings of devils for other pages, such as those of his *Half-Hours in Hades: An Elementary Handbook of Demonology*.¹⁵

Father John O'Connor, the man after whom Chesterton modeled his beloved Father Brown, remarked that after Chesterton had read a book, that book would be beyond useful to anyone else: "Most of his books, as and when he read, had gone through every indignity a book may suffer and live. He turned it inside out, dog-eared it, pencilled it, sat on it, took it to bed and rolled on it, and got up again and spilled tea on it—if he were sufficiently interested."¹⁶ Father O'Connor said that when Chesterton was done reading, the object of his attention would have a "refuted look" about it.¹⁷ There is certainly some truth in this. What remains of Chesterton's personal library certainly contains books that he maltreated, including the book he

13. Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, 13.

14. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 107.

15. Chesterton, *The Coloured Lands*, 66–83.

16. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 219.

17. *Ibid.*

was reading when he died—a very badly damaged 1936 Penguin paperback reprint of Ernest Bramah's *The Wallet of Kai Lung* (1900), which was found in one of his pockets.¹⁸

If we consider Father O'Connor's comments symbolically, rather than purely literally, they take on new meaning: Chesterton, whether he destroyed books or not, was a highly engaged reader. Whether books prompted him to doodle over the text or write remarks in the margins or jot down an idea for a poem on the endsheet, he was always awake to the adventure of words on a page and the world they disclosed. Even if he let his mind wander, as is indicated by so many scribbles inside his books, he was nonetheless still very involved in the process of reading. Reading, for him, was a kind of communion as much as it was a communication, a dwelling with the text rather than a mere looking at the text. It was, like so many aspects of the created order, a sacramental activity that was perpetually reminding him of the real presence of God in the world.¹⁹

Chesterton's role as a reader is further emblemized by one of his tasks at Fisher-Unwin, the publishing house that he worked at before becoming a fulltime journalist. There he had to duplicate the publicity blurbs that he had written by using a cyclostyle—a messy machine that was not well suited to his lack of coordination. He always finished the job covered in ink, his untidy attire rendered even untidier.²⁰ This mess left his colleagues roaring with laughter, and it leaves us with a beautiful symbol. A truly Chestertonian way of reading presupposes that reading is an immersive experience and not a dispassionate exercise. Reading may imply stepping out of and away from the world, but for Chesterton it is about stepping into it. It is a matter of participating with earthly realities through reason and imagination. It is not an act whereby we subject the world to our gaze, but a *conversation*; it is, as the etymology of that word implies, a *turning with* or *living intimately among others*. Through this conversation and even through amicable controversy, we may find ourselves in humble submission to the realities beyond us and more aware of the space around us.

This same passionate engagement is mirrored in Chesterton's approach to writing: he wrote or drew on any scrap of paper he could find, or any physical surface that seemed to welcome his scrawls and jottings.²¹ He wrote *about* the world he was living in, but also sometimes quite literally wrote *on*

18. See Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, 74–78.

19. See Wild, *The Tumbler of God*, 173.

20. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 42; Ward, *Return to Chesterton*, 29.

21. Titterton, *G. K. Chesterton*, 13, 16, 80.

it. His sketches and words were always a direct response to the experience of having the truths of the world etched into his being.

Nevertheless, Chesterton did not ever formally or systematically discuss the framework of his interpretive awareness and his approach to discerning the drama of meaning. As a man of more commonplace and proximate philosophical interests, it was never his concern to tackle such an abstract question. And yet the question of his unique perception remains, if only implicitly, the central fascination of all Chesterton scholarship. We can still undoubtedly gain a great deal from properly understanding the horizon of his interpretive vision. Therefore, my goal here is to offer careful readings and also a kind of reverse-engineering of his writings to provide a clearer sense of the hermeneutic assumptions and recommendations that are implicit in his work. Such a task is not an easy one. To be honest, and to borrow Chesterton's words from a different context, it is a task "for which I feel myself wholly incompetent."²² Nevertheless, I find it comforting to recognize that it is a task that no one could do perfectly. Thankfully, there will always be more to explore and more to say. Still, my hope is that what I offer here is at least a step in the right direction.

The primary difficulty of unpacking a Chestertonian hermeneutic is found in the inevitable fact that the lines between the reader's subjectivity, the horizon of the text, and the discernible concerns of the author will always be somewhat fuzzy. This is particularly evident in the way that Chesterton relays what he has read. It is well known that he committed large portions of what he read to memory because, as he claims, "that is what literature is for; it ought to be part of a man."²³ As a consequence of relying on memory alone, however, he frequently misquotes the authors that he was referring to. When we read his *Robert Browning* (1903), for instance, we find his own words intermingled with the texts that he quotes by heart. It is only when we compare these texts with Browning's originals that we discover discrepancies. Examining the archived printer's proofs for *Browning* shows that a few more errors would probably have slipped through had an editor not had the courage to write in the margins, "Is this version right?" or simply make corrections—to six poems in total—where inaccuracies were perceived.²⁴

Nevertheless, even in the case of his *Robert Browning* we learn something of Chesterton's interpretive practice. We find that for him reading cannot be thought of as a clinical exercise akin to dissecting a corpse on the autopsy table; instead, it is a process of breathing new life into the text.

22. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, 10.

23. Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, 88.

24. Chesterton, *Robert Browning, Draft and Printer's Proofs*.

Even the solid edges of black words on white pages reveal the bleeding of thoughts into one another, the ricocheting of thoughts off one another, and the intimate companionship of words and their assorted denotations and connotations with one another. One could say that reading those lines (and between those lines) becomes an act of finding new life in the self as well. It becomes a contemplative, spiritual practice. Chesterton's way of reading also involves far more than merely reporting on what has been seen and done. Instead, he reads almost as an excuse to revisit his own thoughts.²⁵ He certainly ventriloquizes from time to time, speaking in the name of other authors instead of letting them speak for themselves. And yet, his ventriloquizing is not without boundaries. In his *Autobiography* (1936), Chesterton admits the following concerning his book on Browning:

I will not say I wrote a book about Browning; but I wrote a book about love, liberty, poetry, my own views on God and religion (highly underdeveloped), and various theories of my own about optimism and pessimism and the hope of the world; a book in which the name of Browning was introduced from time to time, I might almost say with considerable art, or at any rate with some decent appearance of regularity.²⁶

While Chesterton may be accused of having incorrectly remembered a few portions of the texts he is quoting, he can hardly be accused, at least in any simplistic sense, of hermeneutic infidelity or hermeneutic violence. In any case, hermeneutic violence is only possible if we assume the myth of pure, unmediated presence that underpins the illusion of a hermeneutics of immediacy. Perhaps we may say, then, that Chesterton's errors are the result of his ardent fidelity.

Chesterton's preference, however much we may criticize him for it, is always for insight over accuracy. He continuously focuses on the interplay of the text with his own imaginings. Thus, he aims to unambiguously present the world as he sees it rather than merely reproduce a carbon copy of the world as Browning might have seen it. Again, we may criticize Chesterton for his imprecision, but we can hardly criticize him for infidelity. Sadly, though, he observed that his own brand of fidelity—this multifaceted, occasionally inaccurate, but always immersive, personal wrestling match with the text—was becoming increasingly endangered in a culture of haste. Thus, we find him writing the following in 1928:

25. Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 101, 78; Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 40.

26. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 103.

I wonder how much there is to-day of the secret avoidance of reading. We hear of the men who went into crypts and caverns to conceal the fact that they were reading the Missal or the Bible. I wonder how many people there are now, locked up in studies and libraries, and concealing the fact that they are not reading the newspaper. It is now assumed that we all read, as it was once perhaps assumed that many of us could not read. But I suspect that in both cases there were secrets and surprises. I suspect that there is many an intelligent man to-day walking about the streets who has never read the newspaper for days, or even weeks, but who contrives to keep up a general air of knowledge founded entirely on hearsay.²⁷

In the above paragraph, which may be more suggestive today than when it was originally written, we find that when Chesterton refers to reading he is not referring simply to the importance of getting one's facts right, although facts are not entirely unimportant to him. Rather, he is referring to what texts illuminate about our embodied experience. Reading seems to be related in Chesterton's mind to the question of what it means to live intentionally, with a balanced combination of discernment and openness. As much as reading Chesterton as a reader may include examining his approach to literary criticism, therefore, it is primarily about grappling with the way that he considers the act of reading to be the mirror of living.

If, as Dale Ahlquist suggests, "looking at Chesterton is not as important as looking at the whole world through his eyes,"²⁸ then perhaps it is worth exploring at length and in some depth what it could mean to look through his eyes. What particulars—absolutes, ideals, hermeneutic considerations, principles, and restrictions—guide a uniquely Chestertonian perspective? How might these particulars contribute to our own exploration of meaning and truth in the world? We can certainly learn a lot from what Chesterton gets right, and perhaps just as much from his occasional missteps.

To guide my enquiry, I have adopted a number of preliminary hermeneutic principles of my own, each of which relates directly to principles that seem to underlie Chesterton's approach to reading. Far from supporting any illusion of naïve, epistemic objectivity, such principles are helpful for foregrounding Chesterton's, as well as my own, interpretive biases. The first principle is found in my refusal to attempt what is known in hermeneutic theory as psychologism, which refers to the Diltheyan belief in the possibility of reconstructing the author's persona through hermeneutic analysis.

27. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, December 8, 1928.

28. Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 101, 9.

Today, our awareness of the more hidden aspects of human thought have lead to a reasonable skepticism against understanding something like the author's intention. Of course, we may still *imagine* what the author was thinking, and thus gain at least some sense of authorial intention, but our imagining will always go wanting simply because it belongs to us and not the author. It will still be our own interpretation rather than a perfect rendition of the author's intention.

I am following Chesterton's lead in this regard. When writing on Shakespeare, for instance, he notes that it would be somewhat pointless and perhaps even dishonest to try to understand an author "outside . . . the reading of his literary works."²⁹ In an early draft of his *Robert Louis Stevenson*, in a passage that does not appear in the final draft, Chesterton explains that he aims to "put *The Child's Garden of Verses*, with all that Stevenson really thought about childhood, before any examples from his own childhood" and also strives to situate "*Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde*, with all its feeling about vice and virtue and temptation before the mere details of his own disturbed and erratic youth."³⁰ And, as if this were not clear enough, when reviewing Hugh Kingsmill's *The Sentimental Journey: A Life of Charles Dickens* (1934), Chesterton warns his reader concerning the so-called modern tendency to forget the distinction, albeit a blurry one, between the inside of a person and his outside: "in all psychology there is this double and rather confusing quality: that the thing which is being studied is also the thing which is studying it."³¹ One's own point of view is always bound to affect the picture one is analyzing. This eventuality is at the heart of all hermeneutic investigation. Subjectivity results not from a lapse in judgment, but from simply being present to something that is being interpreted.

Bearing the above in mind, there can still be no doubt that Chesterton speculates a great deal concerning the thoughts of those he writes about. He is nevertheless careful to recognize the place of his own subjectivity. He knows that we must often acknowledge, especially in the case of those deceased, that we only have access to the author's work, not to the author himself. This is to say that whenever we consider the writings of another, it is helpful to acknowledge a certain intimate distance between the actual man and his work. It is nonetheless convenient to keep Chesterton's life and writings together simply because so many who have written about him to date have done the same. However, while biographical detail is occasionally used below to support my argument, my focus is predominantly on what

29. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 149.

30. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Draft and Printer's Proofs*.

31. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, December 8, 1934.

can be ascertained from Chesterton's writings. Even biographical details are interpreted through his writings, not the other way around.

The second hermeneutic principle for the following exploration is to assume that Chesterton's words ought to have priority above my own opinions, as well as the opinions of others. This is not done for the sake of presenting Chesterton as absolutely without fault, as so many admirers of his work may be tempted to do. Chesterton may or may not have been a saint, but he was always certainly a human being, with very human struggles, failures, and successes. Instead, my intention is simply to ensure that, whatever we may conclude, at least we know with as much certainty as possible what Chesterton's opinions about an issue, subject, or action actually are. I also think that generosity, something so essential to Chesterton's interpretive approach, ought to be at the center of any reading of him. In my view, unduly harsh critique is often offered as a means to tame the work of especially those writers who, like Chesterton, tend towards the radical. Any attempt to tame Chesterton would, I feel, be out of keeping with his monstrous output.

Thirdly, I have made use of a principle to treat Chesterton's corpus as a unified whole. It is safe to say that despite occasional modifications to his ideas, it is not inaccurate to think of him as a remarkably consistent thinker. His good friend W. R. Titterton suggests that "[h]e changed his opinions, but not his beliefs."³² There is always a remarkable consistency in his work.³³ Therefore, I have not kept rigidly to chronology. In his *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913), Chesterton suggests that a chronological approach can often be "as arbitrary as alphabetical order."³⁴ Therefore, I have chosen a thematic approach, again following the lead of my chief subject, grouping Chesterton's ideas according to topic in the hope of getting a better sense of his stance on specific things.

The fourth hermeneutic principle adopted here relates to Chesterton's context, about which I will say more in the following chapter. One of the errors of hermeneutic psychologism, and one of the errors of the contemporary disease of strict literalism, is the myopic assumption that the ideas of an author can simply be taken as is and thereafter transplanted into a later era or otherwise simply read in light of another historical milieu. Chesterton has far too often been decontextualized by both his admirers and critics and has thus been divorced from the world he actually lived in and wrote for.³⁵

32. Titterton, *G. K. Chesterton*, 10.

33. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, xii; Schall, *Schall on Chesterton*, xiv.

34. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, 8.

35. Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism, and Nationhood*, 3; Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, 9.

While this may not always be detrimental to our judgments concerning his work, since Chesterton's hope was always to present a kind of commonsense philosophy, it is safe to say that some of what he said has dated.³⁶

With Chesterton, I concede that the "[i]mmortal writer is he who does something universal in a special manner";³⁷ I believe, though, that the *special* is, as the word's etymology suggests, *specific*, and I thereby reject the tendency to take automatically as universal what Chesterton was clearly speaking about in particular terms. Even if abstract ideas can be extrapolated, this should not be at the expense of specificity. A brief example is instructive: Chesterton wrote quite emphatically and very critically of the suffragist movement and is thus often taken today by certain contemporary Chestertonians to be virulently against all possible feminist discourses, including the more subtle discourses that arose long after he had died. However, apart from indulging in a kind of unruly ignorance, the feminism of the suffragettes cannot reasonably be taken to be synonymous with every complex and nuanced branch of feminism that has existed since Chesterton's death. We cannot convincingly speculate that Chesterton would have necessarily and absolutely resisted every feminist theory simply because he resisted this one type of feminism. In fact, there are ways he idealized women that may in fact lead us to believe that he was a kind of feminist himself—a dedicated defender of womanhood. Therefore, when we read Chesterton on feminism we need to understand precisely what *kind* of feminism he was referring to and precisely what it was that he rejected in it. This should apply to any other idea that Chesterton addressed.

Following the principle of the hermeneutic circle, the part—that is, the reader and/or the details of the text—should be affirmed and not negated by the whole—that is, the larger context within which the part is located; and this needs to be done in keeping with the recognition that the precise point at which the part merges into the whole may be impossible to locate. Although I will be extracting and abstracting certain hermeneutic coordinates from his writings, I maintain that Chesterton was a man of his time, albeit a man often at war with his time—a conversationalist and a controversialist. Reading him now either is or is fast becoming an exercise in anachronism, and continuing to read him faithfully and benevolently in the future necessitates making proper allowances for his own historically affected horizon of understanding. It is therefore helpful to realize that Chesterton's many critiques of the problems of his own era can be taken as hermeneutic issues: his concern is persistently with reading the world accurately. His philosophy

36. Lauer, *G. K. Chesterton*, 3.

37. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, xvii.

repeatedly highlights what is wrong or right in his own age not merely in terms of dogmas, but in terms of approach and attitude.

Of course, I do not presume to be able to capture every nuance regarding what it meant to live in Chesterton's place and time, given that I live in neither and am not in possession of a workable time machine. But the principle of keeping in mind Chesterton's situatedness within an exact historical horizon serves to encourage humility in the reader regarding any judgments or speculations made on the basis of what cannot necessarily be accurately delineated. We would do well in any exercise of theoretical enquiry to avoid the problem of ultracrepidarianism; that is, the practice of speaking outside of our knowledge and experience.

Taking Chesterton's context into account also means grappling as much as possible with his complexity, which happens to be the fifth hermeneutic principle adopted here. While even today Chesterton remains "one of the most quoted writers in the English language,"³⁸ it is also possible that, like Shakespeare, he is more quoted than read.³⁹ And the more he is quoted without being read, the more likely we are to misunderstand him. Chesterton's writings are vivid and clear, because he is a skillful communicator, but they are not necessarily simple in the sense of being reducible. The nuances of his perspective, which are specifically evident in the way that he plays with language, need to be noted and extrapolated, perhaps with even more care than even Chesterton allowed in his readings of others.

This, then, is the only point on which my own hermeneutic approach differs from Chesterton's: I have endeavoured, to the best of my ability, to render his opinions with as much detail, accuracy, and fidelity to context as possible. I make it my business not to misquote him as he did others. And to keep me from straying off course I have also allowed my own understanding to be guided by those dedicated Chesterton scholars who have preceded me, especially those within mainstream critical scholarship. The views of populist Chestertonians are kept in mind as being valuable in their own way, but are not dwelt upon at length. Where I quote a writer, though, it should be assumed that I am only dealing with what that writer happened to say at that particular point. I may, for instance, agree with a writer on a particular point, but—this should go without saying—that does not mean that I agree with everything that he or she says.

In addition to the initial hermeneutic principles outlined above, two metaphors can guide our understanding of Chesterton as a reader, namely *sight* and *drama*. I have already used both, but some clarification may help

38. Schall, *Schall on Chesterton*, vii.

39. Chesterton, *The Soul of Wit*, 13; Dale, *The Outline of Sanity*, xv.

to explain their appropriateness. The first metaphor is perhaps nowhere better presented than in Chesterton's *The Coloured Lands*—the title story of a collection of his fairytales, poetry, and drawings that was compiled and edited by Maisie Ward in 1938. It tells us about a lonely boy named Tommy and his encounter with a strange-looking, blue-bespectacled young man who claims to be his “long lost brother.”⁴⁰ The young man, recognizing that he has an opportunity to do something about Tommy's unhappiness, takes off his blue spectacles and hands them to the boy, who is curious enough to try them on. In an instant, the whole world is transformed. As he is looking at a landscape of black roses and bottle-green grass, the young man addresses him: “Looks like a new world, doesn't it?”⁴¹ Tommy is then given rose-colored spectacles, yellow spectacles, and green spectacles to look through, and ends up thinking that he has been “looking at four totally different landscapes.”⁴²

The strange young man then tells Tommy a story about an opportunity once given to him by a wizard to travel to a land where everything was quite literally blue—with blue flowers, blue skies, blue sea, blue jays, blue kingfishers, blue baboons, and blue books. On finding the Blue Country uninspiring, he had decided to leave. After wandering through a Green Country, where all the people of the land were greengrocers, and thereafter through a Yellow Country, with its yellow fever, yellow flowers, and Yellow Press, he had ended up in a Red Country where he discovered that “in a rose-red city you cannot really see any roses. Everything is a great deal too red. Your eyes are tired until it might just as well all be brown.”⁴³ The young man explains that after he had decided what a terrible mistake these monochromatic worlds were, the wizard who had instigated this excursion reappeared to him and told him to paint a world for himself—a world that he actually liked.

Once he had finished dipping into the paint box of creation and dabbing paint all over the place, he discovered that the world that had once caused him such dissatisfaction was in fact the very same world that he had created. The best of all impossible worlds was the very one he had always been living in. It is a world filled to the brim and overflowing with a wild assortment of different colors and events. It is through this short exchange and this imaginative journey through colored lands that Tommy is given new eyes—spectacle-free. This removal of spectacles does not refer to the

40. Chesterton, *The Coloured Lands*, 20.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 24.

removal of mediation, but rather to the transformation of perception after and through mediation.

For those who read and love his work, it is not a stretch to contend that Chesterton, in a way, is our long lost older brother; he is really the strange young man in the story. He strives always to give his readers new eyes, and so his rhetoric is strikingly visual. However, he is also deeply aware of the invisible dimensions of our engagements with the world, and his use of visual metaphors—as we find in *The Coloured Lands*—points to much deeper, hidden impulses in the human spirit. This tension between the visible (the apparent, being, and the world of becoming) and the invisible (the ultimately real, Being) is therefore something that I aim to explore in far more detail in this book.

The second metaphor that guides our understanding of Chesterton as a reader is that of drama. This metaphor is both overt and implied in Chesterton's work. Chesterton suggests that creation, even with its abundance of poetry and metaphor, is still more like a play than a poem.⁴⁴ The centrality of drama to Chesterton's perception is also found in his narration of "the very first thing" he remembered "seeing with [his] own eyes"—an image of "a young man walking across a bridge" in his Father's home-made toy theatre.⁴⁵ We also discover his eye for drama in the fact that he wrote, acted in, and attended dramas throughout his life and career. "[H]is gift," as Dorothy Sayers notes in her commentary on Chesterton's marvelous posthumously published play *The Surprise* (1952), "was naturally dramatic."⁴⁶ His fiction is also obviously dramatic, but the metaphor of drama helps us to understand his non-fiction as well. It is a metaphor that extends into the realm of reason, where our apprehension of the world, via an observable sequence of events in the midst of other acts, scenes, and agents, follows a process of discovery that is unmistakably dramatic. D. C. Schindler contends that "traditional epistemologies are constitutionally undramatic."⁴⁷ And while evidence for this fact abounds, Chesterton's approach is most definitely not an extension of such epistemologies. For him, life itself is a drama, which has been "written by somebody else" and much of which has been "settled for us without our permission."⁴⁸ It has "a story behind it, not merely intellect which is

44. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 282.

45. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 40.

46. Sayers, "Introduction," 9.

47. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason*, 51.

48. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 144.

partly mechanical, but will, which is divine.”⁴⁹ It is precisely by being in this drama that we find and negotiate meaning.⁵⁰

The drama of meaning is that which considers the metareferential, intermediated interplay of text (as otherness) and reader (as the familiar). This is what Chesterton’s work demonstrates: we always interpret “from the inside,”⁵¹ as co-participants in a larger drama that we can never really see from the outside, and yet are still capable of imagining, if only partially, as if from the outside. We see even those things we do not fully comprehend as props, entities, storylines, and characters that are companions to our embeddedness within the perichoretic performance that is reality. And there can be no doubt that Chesterton openly invites us to join in the exploration of what it all means. Even today, he still invites us to join in the play.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 362.

51. Ibid., 141.