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Holding a Pistol to the Head of ‘Modern Man’ *the Roots of G. K. Chesterton’s Spiritual Theology*

Robert Moore-Jumonville

Abstract:

G. K. Chesterton’s last line of *The Babe Unborn* presents the key to his profound spiritual theology—a way of seeing the world which conveys gratitude for sheer existence and a fairyland attitude of wonder, an astonished wonder arising from the possibility of non-existence: “If only I could find the door, if only I were born.”

The essential features of Chesterton’s spiritual theology are elucidated in his 1912 novel *Manalive*, the main contours of which were drawn at the earliest stage of Chesterton’s theological thinking—in the mid-1890s—before he began his career as a writer and at *the* critical point in his intellectual-spiritual development. Chesterton had descended briefly into suicidal despair only to arise from the gloom with a fresh, open-eyed view of the world that perceived all life with appreciation and gratitude.

Holding a Pistol to the Head of ‘Modern Man’: the Roots of G. K. Chesterton’s Spiritual Theology

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G. K. Chesterton’s last stanza of *The Babe Unborn* presents the key to his profound spiritual theology—a way of seeing the world which conveys gratitude for sheer existence and a fairyland attitude of wonder, an astonished wonder arising from the possibility of non-existence.

I think that if they gave me leave within the world to stand
I would be good through all the day I spent in fairyland
They would not hear a word from me of selfishness or scorn
If only I could find the door, if only I were born.

Few people would use the categories of spiritual theology or spiritual formation in reference to Chesterton.¹ Of course, scholars frequently have recognized Chesterton’s contributions to philosophy, theology, and apologetics. But those who study Chesterton also clearly comprehend that he was not a theologian in any traditional sense of the word.² For instance, he never held a teaching post or an ecclesiastical position and he never wrote theology per se. In fact, technically speaking, he never graduated from college. Actually, Chesterton referred to himself simply as a journalist. But we could easily categorize his theological thinking as *spiritual formation* because he aimed his ideas at heart as well as head, never investing in the detached world of academics: indeed, Chesterton intended what he wrote for transformation rather than for information. Defined simply, Christian spiritual theology calls people on a journey toward transformation into the image and likeness of Christ.³

The essential features of Chesterton’s spiritual theology are elucidated in his 1912 novel *Manalive*,⁴ the main contours of which were drawn at the earliest stage of Chesterton’s theological thinking—in the mid-1890s—before he began his career as a writer and at the critical point in his intellectual-spiritual development.⁵ Chesterton had descended briefly into suicidal despair only to arise from the gloom with a fresh, open-eyed view of the world that perceived all life with appreciation and gratitude. In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton connects the *unborn babe*, “crying out for existence,” and his conception of the tale *Manalive*, whose childlike hero, Innocent Smith, lives life fully.⁶ *Manalive*, therefore, marks both the starting place for understanding Chesterton’s

spiritual theology and its first key moves—both which revolve around the barrel of a revolver.

Instead of starting at the beginning of the story, therefore, with a description of the characters who lodge at Beacon House, let us begin with the smoking gun—with the protagonist, Innocent Smith, firing three shots at the leaping, shrieking figure of Dr. Herbert Warner.⁷ Two of the bullets make neat holes in Warner's top hat. Smith instantly relinquishes the gun amidst peals of uproarious laughter. A little later, one of the boarding house company confesses, "Innocent had told me he was going to shoot at Dr. Warner."⁸ But why shoot at all—and why at Warner?

The central "mystery" of the novel unfolds as Smith faces a trial instigated by the Beacon House residents, where evidence is presented for and against Smith's sanity. Late in the trial, the defense presents a letter from a priest describing how, when Smith studied at Cambridge, a certain professor exposed him to "a starless nihilism" then in vogue. "While his brain accepted the black creed," recounted the letter, "his very body rebelled against it."⁹ The scene where his instructor, Dr. Eames, tempts Smith with suicidal nihilism stands out as one of the humorous highlights in the Chesterton literary corpus. Professor Eames explains to his young apprentice that life is not worth living: most modern people merely anesthetize their pain or deny it. But if we were speaking of a puppy in this condition, persists the professor, we would put it out of its misery. That God does not do us the favor of putting us out of our misery means he is dead. Suddenly, Eames finds himself looking down the barrel of a pistol. In Charlie Chaplin fashion, Smith pursues Eames around the room, vowing to put him out of his misery. The tutor ends up dangling from a second storey gargoyle begging for life. Promising to give anything "to get back," the professor is forced by Smith to sing a hymn:

I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And perched me on this curious place,
A happy English child.¹⁰

It is important to understand that the roots of this scene in *Manalive* lead back to Chesterton's own brooding battle with the pessimistic philosophy of the early 1890s.¹¹ From the existing record it is impossible to state what occurred in his life at this point with any degree of certainty. Various explanations have been offered—from a homosexual identity crisis to normal late-adolescent brooding.¹² What we do know is that a number of factors converged around 1895 to produce in the young twenty-one year old a near suicidal despondency. Chief among the negative influences upon his thinking was his descent into what he called "the darkest depths of the contemporary pessimism."¹³

But other factors affected him as well. First, most of his friends had matriculated to Cambridge or Oxford, leaving Gilbert feeling isolated as he attended Slade Art School at the University of London.¹⁴ To add angst to loneliness, Chesterton found himself

floating in a sea of vocational uncertainty. With art school not working out for him, Chesterton experienced an identity crisis: “What I may call my period of madness coincided with a period of drifting and doing nothing; in which I could not settle down to any regular work.”¹⁵ Before sketching the lackadaisical malaise of students attending art school with him, Chesterton first describes in his *Autobiography* his unsettling experiences of “dabbling” with the occult, experiences that led him to believe in the solidness of sin and deception of the devil. “I dug quite low enough,” he confesses, “to discover the devil; and even in some way to recognize the devil.”

If one window in his world admitted the sinister voices of spiritualism, an adjacent door opened up into the moral relativism of the Decadents, producing in him what he called “a moral anarchy within.” Though he avows that he never acted on his temptations, he said he “could at this time imagine the worst and wildest disproportions and distortions of more normal passions,” seeming to produce “an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images.”¹⁶ While most scholars concentrate on the moral temptations Chesterton encountered during his time at the Slade School, Chesterton finally describes these incidents as disgusting rather than enticing him.¹⁷

What primarily precipitated Chesterton’s despairing descent, consequently, was a nihilistic philosophy not unlike that preached to Innocent Smith—where his “don had professed in theory a preference for non-existence.”¹⁸ Chesterton certainly took non-existence seriously.

What surprises me in looking back on youth, and even on boyhood, is the extreme rapidity with which it can think its way back to fundamental things; and even to the denial of fundamental things. At a very early age I had thought my way back to thought itself. It is a very dreadful thing to do; for it may lead to thinking that there is nothing but thought. . . . It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with its trees and stars; and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad. Yet I was not mad, in any medical or physical sense; I was simply carrying the skepticism of my time as far as it would go. And I soon found it would go a great deal further than most of the skeptics went. While dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind.¹⁹

Gary Wills, in his biographical rendering of this period of Chesterton’s life, emphasizes the personal loneliness engulfing the young Gilbert combined with the fin de siècle spirit of radical subjectivism: “This was the solipsist’s threat, the ‘critical problem’ which haunts the post-Kantian world; but it came to Chesterton embodied in a set of symbols—decadent art’s relativism carried to an ultimate denial, Impressionism’s subjectivity carried to a logically complete an paralyzing subjectivism. . . .”²⁰

But what Wills labels solipsism—a further isolating philosophical turn inward—I would want to call nihilism (as Chesterton himself so often labeled the experience), for it weighed so heavily on the young man that he contemplated suicide.²¹ In *The Autobiography* Chesterton only suggests that he plunged deeper and deeper into his despairing nightmare “as in a blind spiritual suicide.”²² He confided in a letter to his closest friend, Edmund Bently that he descended “very far into the abysses, indeed....”²³ Alzina Dale, however, correctly proposes that Chesterton faced “the temptation to commit suicide.”²⁴ In fact, much of his early work demonstrates an intimate preoccupation with the topic of suicide, often paralleling it with non-existence. Recall, for instance, the important contrast he makes between the martyr and the suicide in *Orthodoxy* and the vociferousness of his argument: “Not only is suicide a sin, it is the sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence The suicide is ignoble because he has not this link with being: he is a mere destroyer; spiritually, he destroys the universe.”²⁵ Other examples of Chesterton’s fascination with suicide could be piled high. Let me cite just a few.

First, *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*—Gilbert’s second publication (1900)—is not only littered with themes of death and finitude, but places *The Babe Unborn* second, with its closing lines: “if only I were born.”²⁶ One of the important poems in the collection, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, demonstrates how personal this topic was for Chesterton. The reader is tricked into thinking that the narrator is contemplating killing some enemy perhaps: “I had grown weary of him.” Then the last stanza performs a somersault:

Then I cast down the knife upon the ground
And saw that mean man for one moment crowned
I turned and laughed: for there was no one by—
The man that I had sought to slay was I.²⁷

What we read in *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*, however, does not breed despair, but instead trumps nihilism with a Psalm-Eight-like attitude, confident of human dignity: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them,/ mortals that you care for them?/ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,/ and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4-5).

A Ballade of Suicide, appearing later in *Poems* (1915), beautifully represents Chesterton’s paschal intuition that out of the winter-death threat of non-existence blooms an appreciation for the simplest facts of every day life. The narrator’s whimsical depiction of the spiffy gallows in his garden and the line of neighbors arrayed along the wall to watch him hang himself contrasts with the poem’s refrain: “I think I will not hang myself today.” Alzina Dale misunderstands the drift of the poem when she says “Gilbert kidded himself and his youthful terrors by writing the smooth and sassy poem ‘A Ballade of Suicide’”²⁸ Indeed, the poem indulges in “kidding,” but not so much to exorcise

past fears as to spotlight present Innocent-Smith-like appreciation. The second stanza is worth deliberation:

To-morrow is the time I get my pay—
My uncle's sword is hanging in the hall—
I see a little cloud all pink and grey—
Perhaps the Rector's mother will *not* call—
I fancy that I heard from Mr. Gall
That mushrooms could be cooked another way—
I never read the works of Juvenal—
I think I will not hang myself to-day.²⁹

Notice, first, how almost anything justifies continuing existence. The day may not turn out as badly as we thought—perhaps the Rector's mother will *not* drop by. But even marveling at mundane cloud formations, or relishing the flavor of a new recipe, might warrant staying alive at least another day. His uncle's sword hanging in the hall conjures up images of the childlike antics of Innocent Smith, in *Manalive*: just imagine what games one could invent with a sword!³⁰ And the works of Juvenal—an obscure Roman satirist and poet—may prove enjoyable: who can know without trying? Innocent Smith issues a similar call to the bored boarders of Beacon Hill:

When you're really shipwrecked, you do really find what you want. When you're really on a desert island, you never find it a desert. If we were really besieged in his garden we'd find a hundred English birds and English berries that we never knew were here. If we were snowed up in this room, we'd be the better for reading scores of books in that bookcase that we don't even know are there.³¹

Perhaps we would read Juvenal aloud to one another until we pealed with side-splitting laughter. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton clearly connects the precarious human condition—“that any man in the street is a Great Might-Not-Have-Been”—with a deep appreciation for the simple things that *are*:

It is a good exercise, in empty or ugly hours of the day, to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the bookcase, and think how happy one could be to have brought it out of [Crusoe's] sinking ship on to the solitary island. But it is a better exercise still to remember how all things have had this hair-breath escape: everything has been saved from a wreck.³²

Here is Chesterton's pistol shot through the hat of modern man—the wake up call, as it were, announcing not only the reality of human finitude, but the gift of tangible life: that “in some way all good [is] a remnant to be stored and held sacred....” “I felt and feel as though life itself is as bright as the diamond, but as brittle as the window pane,”

confessed Chesterton; “and when the heavens were compared to the terrible crystal I can remember a shudder. I was afraid that God would drop the cosmos with a crash.”³³

We should note that in *Manalive*, when Innocent Smith confronts Professor Eames with his pistol, the result amounts to a conversion for both men. Almost instantly, Eames perceives the world with fresh eyes. “All these colored crests [roofs] seemed to have something oddly individual and significant about them,” considered Eames. “He wondered for the first time what people lived in [these villas with the spotted blinds].” Observing this striking change in his pedantic professor persuades Smith to adopt a new mission: “I mean to keep those bullets for pessimists—pills for pale people...I am going to hold a pistol to the head of Modern Man.”³⁴

Smith then makes reference to the ancient and medieval spiritual discipline of *memento mori*—of meditating not only on one’s death, but on the fragility of human existence—as a summons to sort through one’s values and order one’s loves. The Psalmist confronts us soberly with the same spiritual exercise: “Surely everyone stands as a mere breath./ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow” (Psalm 39:5b-6a).³⁵ Another way to express this is to soulfully consider what we would do if notified we had only a year left to live? Chesterton valued Samuel Johnson’s quip: “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” This is how the revolver functions for Smith—awakening humans to the life in front of them: “I shall not use it to kill [Modern Man]. Only to bring him to life.”³⁶ As Hugh Kenner noted so perceptively: “Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are.”³⁷

A profound parallel exists between this double move of Chesterton’s—from danger to delight, from existential worry to wakefulness—and what is normally considered the first two stages of spiritual formation: purgation and illumination.³⁸ As with baptismal imagery, the plunging to the depths and the rising again comprise two rhythms of one motion (parallel, of course, with Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension as nearly a single movement). As experienced by human beings, purgation’s purging is often filtered through a despairing darkness. Authors Robert Mulholland and James Finley both use the passage in Genesis where Jacob wrestles with an angel to symbolize this cavernous passageway to faith. Finley captures the intensity of the scene: “Jacob is alone, as if in solitude in the dark night, and suddenly without warning he is engaged in conflict. His adversary is mysterious—called both God and man. His adversary wounds him, yet blesses him.”³⁹

While the purgative way is also the ascetical way, it is not only a path of renunciation but one of appreciation as well. Although purgation certainly denotes turning away from sin, it means more than mere negative repentance; purgation also implies a turning toward, as when the Prodigal Son “comes to his senses” in the pig pen and declares: “I will get up and go to my Father” (Luke 15:17, 18). Kallistos Ware delineates this distinction delightfully:

Correctly understood, repentance is not negative but positive. It means not self-pity or remorse but conversion, the re-centering of our whole life upon the Trinity. It is to look not backward with regret but forward with hope—not downward at our own shortcomings but upwards at God’s love. It is to see, not what we have failed to be, but what by divine grace we can now become; and it is to act upon what we see. To repent is to open our eyes to the light.⁴⁰

Recall how, in *Manalive*, Eames and Smith both swiftly shift from despair to delight—as if waking from a nightmare, or as if emerging re-born. Chesterton described this conversion experience from darkness to light vividly in his biography of St. Francis of Assisi—as a double movement of descent and ascent. Having badly quarreled, Francis’s father locked his son up in some sort of dungeon: “the wretched young man seems to have disappeared underground,” Chesterton suggests, “into some cavern or cellar where he remained huddled hopelessly in the darkness.” Consider Chesterton’s own period of despair, when he says of St. Francis “it was his blackest moment; the whole world had turned over; the whole world was on top of him.” Chesterton, who was always self-deprecating, insisted on a disclaimer: “If I do not know what this reversal or inversion feels like, it is because I have never been there.” But, of course, Chesterton did know something of St. Francis’s darkness—at least well enough to depict the scene dramatically as “a reversal of a certain psychological kind.” Notice two features in Chesterton’s following narrative: first, how the black descent of St. Francis finally opens into an upward, transformative passageway; and second, how the saint’s perception is altered through the experience. Chesterton likens this reversal to a somersault.

The man who went into the cave was not the man who came out again; in that sense he was almost as different as if he were deadAnd the effects of this on his attitude toward the world were really as extravagant as any parallel can make them. He looked on the world differently from other men as if he had come out of that dark hole walking on his hands.⁴¹

In an apt depiction both of his own contemplative spirit, and of the more universal human progression from purgation to illumination, Chesterton sums up what had happened within St. Francis: “The transition from the good man to the saint is a sort of revolution; by which one for whom all things illustrate and illuminate God becomes one for whom God illustrates and illuminates all things.”⁴² In other words, out of an awareness of radical dependence—that we only live and move and have our being in God—a profound sense of gratitude for all existing things wells up in Francis. This parallels precisely Chesterton’s experience as described in *The Autobiography* and fictionalized in *Manalive*.⁴³ In *The Autobiography* he recounts how having been “for some time in these, the darkest depths of contemporary pessimism, I had a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge this incubus or throw off this nightmare.” Next, he

marveled at bare existence: “Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing,” he realized. Then followed gratitude and wonder: “a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence.” It seems very simple. It was. He understood “that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy.”⁴⁴ James Finley describes Christian contemplation in a similar way: “It is just that for a fleeting moment we are awakened to the sheer miracle of simply being alive.”⁴⁵ As for Innocent Smith, all of life for Chesterton—even the most ordinary objects or experiences—took on sacramental significance.

In fact, the phrase Chesterton uses above to describe Saint Francis—“one for whom God illustrates and illuminates all things”—stands as an apt characterization of spiritual theology’s stage of illumination. James Finley, for instance, employs similar terms in his study of Thomas Merton: “the mystic is simply one who sees things as they are; he sees all of life as coming from God, sustained by God, and returning back to God.”⁴⁶ How striking that the words Finley uses to describe contemplative awakening parallel Chesterton’s own conversion accounts of St. Francis and Innocent Smith. Acting as Beacon House prophet, Smith cries out: “Leave off buying and selling, and start looking! Open your eyes and you’ll wake up in the New Jerusalem.”⁴⁷ Remember how Kallistos Ware defined repentance: “To repent is to open our eyes to the light.”⁴⁸ Moreover, Finley’s language matches the assessment of critic Hugh Kenner who argued that Chesterton “was first a contemplative and second an artist.” Finley speaks of contemplative awakening, of greater levels of awareness, and of becoming more humbly open, and more deeply aware as one progresses along the contemplative path. “As we do so, our eyes are opened to the hallowed light in which we live our lives.”⁴⁹ Kenner, agrees, suggesting “Chesterton wrote as he did because he saw, and not because he wanted to make a stir; and he saw the world as madly as he did because his eyes were especially open”⁵⁰ “Don’t let us let the eye rest,” demands Chesterton in a preface to an early collection of his essays: “Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see the startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted face.”⁵¹

It is just this sort of eye-opening effect Innocent Smith has on the Beacon House residents. Shortly after arriving he bursts through an attic trapdoor onto the starlit roof. Two characters that follow after him, Michael Moon and Arthur Ingelwood, are described “as men who had long been consciously imprisoned in the commonplace.” Suddenly the perception of both men is transformed so “their first feeling was that they had come out into eternity.”⁵² Reminiscent of Chesterton’s yachtsman analogy in *Orthodoxy*, Innocent Smith leaves home, circling the globe, so that when he returns he can fully appreciate his own home, wife, and life—learning to see them with new eyes. learning to “covet his own goods.”⁵³ Toward the end of the book, the character Michael Moon summarizes the principle Smith lives by: “he refuses to die while he is still alive. He seeks to remind himself by every electric shock to the intellect that he is still a man alive, walking on two legs about the world.”⁵⁴

Out of his own spiritual autobiography, then, Chesterton created a summons for modern human beings to wake from spiritual slumber. As Augustine intimated in his *Confessions*, Chesterton recognized that his story of rising from despair to gratitude was potentially every person's story. But what, then, is the *point* of the pistol in *Manalive*? It is an evangelistic point—like the tip of the sword Chesterton concealed in his swordstick—imploping us to admit our human condition of radical finitude and fragility. Much of modern culture refuses to admit the point. Instead, modern civilization either denies finitude or runs from the question altogether, distracting or entertaining itself to death. Some stubbornly accept the serpent's lie that forbidden fruit will make us *like God*. "The most original modern thinkers," comments a side character in *Manalive*, "would all say that what we want most is to be lost." Other moderns simply fall into a rut of oblivion: "Madness does not come by breaking out," insists Moon, "but by giving in; by settling down in some dirty, little, self-repeating circle of ideas; by being tamed."⁵⁵

Perhaps this helps explain the difference in *Manalive* between the two doctors—Warner and Eames. When Professor Eames looked over the precipice of existence, we recall, he begged to get back on the ledge of life, miraculously beginning to see all things anew. Eames, the nihilist philosopher, whose philosophy evidently lacked depth, only had a pistol pointed at him. In contrast, when bullets fly through the hat of the materialist scientist, Dr. Warner, nothing much happens. Why not? How do we explain Warner's existential nonchalance? Close to the end of the book, several characters stand conversing with Warner. "But really the bullet missed you by several feet," recalls the American private investigator named Pym. "The bullet missed him by several years," retorts Michael Moon—followed by silence. He continues: "We have been sitting with a ghost. Dr. Herbert Warner died years ago."⁵⁶ It appears that Warner never awoke from his spurious humanistic confidence.

If, in contrast to Warner, we admit our human condition, we are freed to appreciate life, to live fully awake and alive—as the New Testament so often calls believers to live soberly, watchfully, and with vigilance. Perhaps Chesterton appeals to a growing audience today because he conveys a worldview realistic enough to take human finitude seriously, without despairing. Like the difference between the existentialisms of Sartre and Kierkegaard, the prospect of human finitude may turn us either to despairing nihilism or to joyful faith. As if through the eyes of a child, Chesterton sees all things new, all things as wonderfully miraculous. The pistol, then, is only a pointer—inviting us to joyful dependence on a loving God. "Man is more himself, man is more manlike when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief [despair] the superficial."⁵⁷

¹ Though he would not have used the term *spiritual theology*, Hugh Kenner, in his insightful book, *Paradox in Chesterton* demonstrates that he thoroughly understands Chesterton along these lines. If Kenner rightly rejects the notion that Chesterton was a *mystic* "in the sense that St. John of the Cross was a mystic, or St. Theresa," he nevertheless correctly comprehends Chesterton as "essentially a

contemplative”—that is, one who intuitively perceives deeply into the reality of things (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947: 61, 11). Two recent articles have appeared on the “spirituality” of Chesterton, which of course is a different subject than his spiritual theology. See George Bull, *The Spirituality of G. K. Chesterton*, *The Chesterton Review*, vol.26, November 2000: 455-461; and Karl Schmude, *The Spirituality of Chesterton*, *The Chesterton Review*, vol.32, Spring/Summer 2006: 97-111.

² Cf. Quentin Lauer, S.J., *G. K. Chesterton: Philosopher Without Portfolio*, New York: Fordham University, 1991: 5-8. See also Stratford Caldecott, *Was Chesterton A Theologian?* *Chesterton Review* Vol. XXIV, Nov 1998: 465 ff.

³ The following statements further elucidate what I mean by spiritual theology (“spiritual formation” functions as an appropriate synonym, though in Chesterton’s context, “spiritual theology” is the more accurate term). Spiritual formation is “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey*, Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993: 15). “As the medieval mystics liked to say, we bear the image of Christ but have not yet grown into his likeness” (William A. Simpson, *From Image to Likeness*, New York: Continuum, 1997: 12). “Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, Colorado Springs: Navpress 2002: 22). “My condition is called a desire for God’s ‘habitual presence’ . . . In spiritual theology this condition is not merely recognized; guidance is provided on how that hunger may be satisfied.” (Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, Boston: Cowley 1997: 2).

⁴ Most reviewers of *Manalive* at the time understood the book as some sort of allegory—“a metaphysical extravaganza” wrote *The Times Literary Supplement*. But opinions of the book ranged wildly—from “a total, unredeemed, blank failure”—*British Weekly*—to “some good fun, some good old-fashioned moral philosophy, and a very wholesome sermon”—R. A. Scott James (in ed. D. J. Conlon, *G. K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments Part I: 1900-1937*, Rodestraat: Antwerp Studies in English Literature, 1976: 283-296).

⁵ The Ignatius Press editors of Chesterton’s Collected Works (hereafter cited as CW) have smiled on scholars by publishing many of Chesterton’s early notebooks and unfinished manuscripts. The first volume of his poems, for instance, contains much that Gilbert never intended for publication. Yet these efforts give us a glimpse of how early Chesterton’s essential thought formed—even before the onset of his writing career. Although key parallels exist, Lynette Hunter wrongly assumes that *Manalive* arose out of ideas implicit in *Orthodoxy* (*G. K. Chesterton: Explorations in Allegory*, New York: St. Martin’s, 1979: 104). Volume XIV of the CW includes *The Human Club*, from the mid 1890s, and *The Man With Two Legs*, from the later 1890s, each containing the essential material that would appear in Chesterton’s first novels. *The Man With Two Legs* adumbrates *Manalive*—both in terms of specific symbolism (wind, legs, playfulness, the revolver, etc.) and in terms of the general role that nihilism and near death play in awakening the soul to the sacredness of ordinary existence. See *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works XIV*, San Francisco: Ignatius 1993, 769-801. *Manalive* ideas contained in *The Man With Two Legs* can be linked back to *The Human Club* (mid-1890s) and *Homesick at Home* (1896; CW XIV 64-68, reprinted in *The Coloured Lands*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1938: 233-238. We know the summary of *The Man With Two Legs* was written on Fisher-Unwin paper, a publisher Gilbert worked for from 1895-1901, but there are drafts earlier than this (CW XIV 769). Alzina Stone Dale suggests that *Manalive* was forming in Chesterton’s mind around 1895-96 (*The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G. K. Chesterton*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982: 39). In *The Autobiography*, Chesterton himself connects the ideas of *Manalive* with *The Babe Unborn* (CW XVI). If Chesterton’s suicidal “breakdown” occurred some time in 1894 or 1895, then the point in *Manalive* of offering to put nihilism out of its misery with a revolver is rooted deep in Gilbert’s own experience.

⁶ *The Autobiography*, CW XVI, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988: 97-98.

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Manalive*. Mineola: Dover, 2000: 36-7.

⁸ *Manalive* 43.

⁹ *Ibid.* 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 69-70.

¹¹ See note 5 above.

¹² See Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947: 43-49; Gary Wills, *Chesterton*, New York: Image, 2001: 24-26; Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence*, San Francisco:

Ignatius 1996:23-25; Alzina Stone Dale, *The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G. K. Chesterton*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982: 30-34; and Christopher Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton*, London: Hollis, 1970: 27-28.

¹³ *Autobiography* 96.

¹⁴ Ward 48.

¹⁵ *Autobiography* 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 96. Two of his closest friends at the time saw his sketching notebooks and wondered together if he were going mad (Ward 44).

¹⁷ See Ward: 45-46; Pearce: 27-8; Wills 31-38; and Michael Ffinch, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1986 42-43. Chesterton's essay, *The Diabolist*, presents a young acquaintance of Chesterton's who indulged so wantonly in debauchery, calling good evil, that Gilbert felt compelled to flee from him (*The Diabolist*, *Tremendous Trifles*, London: Methuen, 1909: 225-231). Similarly, Chesterton's character Orm, in *The Wild Knight*, emanates such cynical self-satisfaction about his sin (like "the Seducer" in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*) that he arouses only loathing from readers in the end. It seems odd, then, that Karl Schmude, in his essay on *The Spirituality of Chesterton*, gives such attention to youthful lust during this period of Gilbert's life (100-101). George Bull comes closer to the point when he says: "The roots of Chesterton's spirituality are in his early grasp of his own propensity to evil which intensified the exuberance of his delight in the actuality, beauty and beneficence of God's Creation" (*The Spirituality of G. K. Chesterton* 459).

¹⁸ *Manalive* 91.

¹⁹ *Autobiography* 95.

²⁰ Wills 24.

²¹ In his chapter *The Fairy God Mother Philosophy*, David W. Fagerberg, by over-emphasizing the wonder, joy, and gratitude Gilbert eventually discovers, nearly turns Chesterton's early pessimism into a common experience of existential boredom Fagerberg, *The Size of Chesterton's Catholicism*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1998:21-27. Chesterton's plight at the time was much more serious. The important point is rather, as Kenner maintains: "Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are" (36).

²² *Autobiography* 96.

²³ Ward 49. "Doubts that drove us through the night" was how Chesterton phrased it later in his dedicatory poem to Bently in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (*The Annotated Thursday*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999: 25).

²⁴ Dale 33.

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, San Francisco: Ignatius 1995: 78-79, 98.

²⁶ See, for instance: *The Skeleton, Ultimate, Thou Shalt Not Kill, The End of Fear, The Pessimist, The Praise of Dust*, etc., and compare the character Orm's nihilism in *The Wild Knight* (G. K. Chesterton, *G. K. Chesterton's Early Poetry*, Seattle: Inkling 2004). Cf. also Wills' section, *The Testimony of the Wild Knight* 31-37). *The Taming of a Nightmare* (1892) also provides evidence of the despondent spirit hovering over Chesterton during this period (CW XIV San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993 45-59).

²⁷ *G. K. Chesterton's Early Poetry* 52-53.

²⁸ Dale 33.

²⁹ *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1932: 180.

³⁰ "[During his trial] he had been provided with pens and paper, out of the latter of which he made paper boats, paper darts, and paper dolls contentedly through the whole proceedings." "Why don't they make more games out of the wind?" he asked in some excitement" (*Manalive* 56, 9)

³¹ *Manalive* 24.

³² *Orthodoxy* 69.

³³ *Ibid.* 70, 61-62.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 70-73.

³⁵ "Human beings are mere scraps of life, here only for an instant." This opening sentence in Oliver Clements *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* conveys this sense of radical human finitude (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993: 15).

³⁶ *Manalive* 73-74.

³⁷ Kenner 36.

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- ³⁸ Mulholland 75; Allen 10-14; Simpson 28. “*Purgation* is the process that deals with our areas of unlikeness to Christ. *Illumination* is the emergence of a new being that begins to manifest something of the image of Christ in the world” (Mulholland 75).
- ³⁹ James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2003: 106; cf. Mulholland 138-140.
- ⁴⁰ Kallistos Ware *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s, 2002: 113-114
- ⁴¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, New York: Doubleday, 1990: 55, 73, 70.
- ⁴² Ibid 76.
- ⁴³ Cf. *Saint Francis* 77-78 with *The Autobiography* 96-97, 321-26.
- ⁴⁴ *Autobiography*, 96, 97.
- ⁴⁵ Finley, *Christian Meditation*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004: 44.
- ⁴⁶ Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*: 91.
- ⁴⁷ *Manalive* 25.
- ⁴⁸ See n.40.
- ⁴⁹ Finley, *Christian Meditation*: 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 47.
- ⁵⁰ Kenner 15, 5.
- ⁵¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* vi.
- ⁵² *Manalive* 16.
- ⁵³ *Manalive* 93. The idea for this part of *Manalive* was sketched out in Chesterton’s 1896 tale *Homesick at Home* (CW XIV 64-68)
- ⁵⁴ *Manalive* 121.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid 103, 27.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. 124.
- ⁵⁷ *Orthodoxy* 166.