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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh
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Romance and the Pocket Pistol: The Armed Poet in *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Jessica D. Dooley

Chesterton's poet-protagonists bear arms as a matter of course, and take up the pocket pistol as readily as the pen. Why is that? What is the romance of the pocket pistol? In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, both the poet Syme and the anarchist Gregory were able to perceive the real and practical consequences of ideas. The policeman and the anarchist alike knew that anarchy was not an intangible creed, but an imminent and practical plan of attack. Though dismissed in Saffron Park, anarchy was real, so real that Syme could duel it – and he did. The romance of the pocket pistol is that the poet, who knows the value of life, also knows that there is something worth dying for. Syme “felt a strange and vivid value in all the earth around him, in the grass under his feet; he felt the love of life in all living things” (TMWWT, Chapter X) before his duel with the Marquis, who embodied in a single opponent all the horror of the conscienceless, implacable purpose of anarchy. But the very diabolical impossibility of the fact that the Marquis was impervious to injury filled Syme with a renewed sense of reality. “After all,” he said to himself, “I am more than a devil; I am a man. I can do the one thing which Satan himself cannot do – I can die” (TMWWT, Chapter X). In the glow of his “chivalric folly,” Syme knew the power and the horror of anarchy, its unthinkable intentions, and incredible imminence. That is why the pocket pistol takes on such chivalric significance; it has become a tool, not to kill a man, but to combat an idea. The romance of the pocket pistol is that an idea may become a man.

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"But the more [Syme] felt this glittering desolation in the moonlit land, the more his own chivalric folly glowed in the night like a great fire. Even the common things he carried with him – the food and the brandy and the loaded pistol – took on exactly that concrete and material poetry which a child feels when he takes a gun upon a journey or a bun with him to bed. The sword-stick and the brandy-flask, though in themselves only the tools of morbid conspirators, became the expressions of his own more healthy romance."

The Man Who Was Thursday by G. K. Chesterton, Chapter IV

What is the Romance of the Pocket Pistol? If the pen is mightier than the sword, why do Chesterton's poets take up the latter as readily as the former? Gabriel Syme, the protagonist of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, is the archetype of Chesterton's armed poets. A young poet whose whole life experience leads him to abhor anarchy with an intensity "not quite sane," Syme feels that organized law has its "back to the wall; he was too quixotic to have cared for it otherwise." (Chapter IV) As he is walking on the Thames Embankment deploring the police force's apparent oblivion to the danger of intellectual anarchy, Syme encounters a curiously philosophical policeman, who assures him that a special police force is engaged on a secret crusade against wicked intellectual conspiracy, and invites Syme to meet their leader. Syme at once does so, and is commissioned to join them. "Mr Gabriel Syme was not merely a detective who pretended to be a poet; he was really a poet who had become a detective." (Chapter IV) This is a charming and intentional concept: Chesterton's poets are almost always poet-detectives. Father Brown is a priest-detective; Mr. Horne Fisher, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, is a poet-detective; Mr Basil Grant from *The Club of Queer Trades* is a poet-detective. What is this dual vocation? In *Tremendous Trifles*, Chesterton describes "a true artist" as "a person of exquisite susceptibilities and nothing else." In Chapter V of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, he describes Syme as "one of those men who are open to all the more nameless psychological influences in a degree a little dangerous to mental health. Utterly devoid of fear in physical dangers, he was a great deal too sensitive to the smell of spiritual evil." A detective seeks to identify truth *and* expose falsehood. That pursuit and goal defines Chesterton's poet-detective. Armed with their "exquisite susceptibility," they look for truth and falsehood in the minds and hearts of their fellow men. The extraordinary philosophical policeman that Syme meets along the Thames Embankment describes the vocation of the poet-detective: "The ordinary detective discovers from a ledger or a diary that a crime has been committed. We discover from a book of sonnets that a crime *will* be committed. ... We say that the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher. ... [These] philosophers hate life itself, their own, as much as other people's." (Chapter IV) The poet-detective's efforts are predicated on the conviction that truth in ideas is of ultimate importance. Equally important is the exposure of false ideas, and the poet becomes a detective to distinguish falsehood from truth, and openly discredit it.

The supreme importance of ideas in the poet's worldview is concisely expressed in the Scripture: "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." (Proverbs 23:7, KJV, ASV) Chesterton's poet lives in the world of ideas; they are more tangible to him than the physical world. He has a keen awareness of the interaction between ideas and the actual, of the causal relationship between thought and reality. As a result, he is essentially a man of action. To combat the anarchy which he perceives through spiritual intuition, he takes up the sword – and the pocket pistol.

Syme penetrates a secret enclave of anarchists, and through an inspired bluff, gets himself elected a member of the Supreme Council of European Anarchists. He had unwittingly promised his anarchist acquaintance, the poet Gregory, not to reveal the existence of the anarchists to the police, and he undertakes a solitary venture to defeat the anarchists from within. Chesterton describes Syme's isolation and his chivalry, the romance of the pocket pistol:

“Over the whole landscape lay a luminous and unnatural discoloration, as of that disastrous twilight which Milton spoke of as shed by the sun in eclipse; so that Syme fell easily into his first thought, that he was actually on some other and emptier planet, which circled round some sadder star. But the more he felt this glittering desolation in the moonlit land, the more his own chivalric folly glowed in the night like a great fire. Even the common things he carried with him – the food and the brandy and the loaded pistol – took on earth that concrete and material poetry which a child feels when he takes a gun upon a journey or a bun with him to bed. The sword-stick and the brandy-flask, though in themselves only the tools of morbid conspirators, became the expressions of his own more healthy romance. The sword-stick became almost the sword of chivalry, and the brandy the wine of the stirrup-cup. “

The Man Who Was Thursday, Chapter IV

Chesterton has made the poet Syme a person of “exquisite susceptibilities”: susceptible to the impressions of atmospheres and appearances, susceptible to exaggeration born of enthusiasm, and susceptible to heroism in a crisis. Syme's poetic susceptibility led him to the inescapable conviction that the existence of a wrong idea requires prompt and energetic action. That is an expression of romance: the feeling that something both can and ought to be done. It is easy to feel that anarchy is regrettable, and that something ought to be done about it by the proper authorities. But it is surely an access of Syme's poetic romance that makes him feel that *he is able to do it* – able to become a policeman, able to effectively combat the forces of anarchy, able to successfully infiltrate the Central Anarchist Council, able to prevent the Marquis from performing his bomb-throwing mission in Paris by engaging him in a mortal duel. Syme does not believe that *only* he could do it; that is conceit, not romance. Romance forgets the self in the belief that there is something worth doing, that the doing is possible, and that failure, or the lack of action, is untenable. In fact, when Syme begins to dwell on his own position, his isolation and danger, he becomes morbid, ineffective, and somewhat paranoid (Chapter VII, VIII). Romance is the opposite of pessimism, but it is not the opposite of practicality. Romance inspires Syme to carry the pocket pistol, because he feels there is something useful that he can do with it. It is worth noting that romantic sensibility does not interfere with sense. In Chapter X, Chesterton declares, “Syme was subject to spasms of singular common sense, not otherwise a part of his character. They were poetic intuitions, and they sometimes rose to the exaltation of prophecy.” “Poetic intuition” is the poet's primary epistemology.

Under the influence of his “chivalric folly,” Syme's excited sensibilities find the bleak, tangible façade of London filled with sinister significance. “To Syme's exaggerative mind the bright, bleak houses and terraces by the Thames looked as empty as the mountains of the moon,” which they most probably were not (Chapter IV). They were, perhaps, pleasant, homey, and comfortable, and filled with contented folk. But was Syme's chivalry foolish? Those folk lived in ignorance of the mighty conspiracy to destroy their very lives, which Syme steamed up the Thames to seek. Their ignorance, and the impending malevolence of the anarchists, is what made the houses seem desolate; Syme's secret knowledge of the true nature of the peace in which they lived – a peace on the edge of stealthy violence – separated him from them as effectively as a sudden exile to an alien world. Now that he knew of the existence of the anarchists, there was for him no other existence possible. The anarchists' intentions seemed vague and silly to the women of Saffron Park because they believed that the anarchy of the Gregory, red-haired poet, was utterly divorced from reality, ideas never to be realized. But both Syme and Gregory were poets, which enabled them to perceive real and practical consequences of those ideas. An idea is the blueprint of the actual. The poet is convicted that ideas, far from being intangible, are the stuff of reality.

Chesterton's poet perceives that ideas, what people say and what people think, are ultimately of incalculable significance. To him, there is no distinction between the ethereal and the actual, between the conception of an evil idea, and the execution of a wicked act. To the artist of "exquisite susceptibility," an idea is as concrete as a visible fact. His artistic medium is the word, which precedes all existence and all action. "For he spoke and they were made: he commanded and they were created." (Psalm 33:9, Douay-Rheims) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1, NIV) If this is so, an idea can achieve fundamental change in the nature of things, whether in the condition of the world or the condition of a man. The poet feels, with acute excitement, that a wicked idea could destroy the world, and only true ideas can prevent it. That is why the poet sets out armed to combat an idea: because the idea has set out armed to attack him.

The poet's pocket pistol is the badge of his orthodoxy. That which is believed by men has eternal consequences for their souls. A belief is the fundamental unit of intention. Far be it from Syme to adopt the craven creed that ideas do not matter, that a view expressed is "just talk," that what a man believes does not have any effect on his daily interactions with his fellow men. The anarchists took comprehensive advantage of this widespread, fundamental error. The Anarchist Council held their weekly meetings on the balcony of a restaurant, and their diabolical talk provoked indulgent laughter in the waiters and pedestrians alike. The anarchist Gregory disguised himself as an *anarchist*, and talked anarchy at artistic tea parties throughout Saffron Park, safe in the certainty that he would never be believed. As he boasted to Syme, "I preached blood and murder to those women day and night, and – by God – they would let me wheel their perambulators." (Chapter II)

The policeman and the anarchist alike knew that anarchy was not an intangible creed, but an imminent and practical plan of attack. Though dismissed as frivolity in Saffron Park, anarchy was real, so real that Syme could duel it – and he did. In order to divert the Marquis de Saint Eustache from travelling to Paris in time to assassinate the French President and the Czar, Syme takes advantage of the Marquis' noble heritage, and challenges him to a duel. The Marquis embodied in a single opponent all the horror of the conscienceless, implacable purpose of anarchy. The fact that the Marquis afterwards is revealed as an ally in disguise did not diminish the fact that Syme was dueling with an idea, fighting a chivalric contest for the fate of the world against a devil incarnate, against the idea of murder in the anarchist's mind. Ideas become inflexible purpose, and are wrought by the hands of men. As they begin to fight, Syme "found himself in the presence of the great fact of the fear of death, with its coarse and pitiless common sense. ... He felt a strange and vivid value in all the earth around him, in the grass under his feet; he felt the love of life in all living things... He had the feeling that if by some miracle he escaped he would be ready to sit for ever before that almond tree, desiring nothing else in the world." (Chapter X). The very diabolical impossibility of the fact that the Marquis was apparently impervious to injury filled Syme with a renewed sense of reality. "After all," [Syme] said to himself, 'I am more than a devil; I am a man. I can do the one thing which Satan himself cannot do – I can die.'" (Chapter X) The romance of the pocket pistol is that the poet, who knows the value of life, also knows that there is something worth dying for.

This is another expression of romance: the conviction that to adhere to a true idea is more important than to remain alive. Syme is constrained from calling in the aid of the police against the anarchists' plots by the promise he had given Gregory not to reveal Gregory's secret to the police. Confronted by the terrible Anarchist Council, Syme feels horribly tempted to escape his untenable position by breaking his promise. But as President Sunday reveals that he is aware of the presence of a traitor, Syme overcomes his temptation, certain, with a rush of romance, that to keep his word – to the death – affirmed his moral superiority over the anarchists. "This liberation of his spirit from the load of his weakness went with a quite clear decision to embrace death. ... This very pride in keeping his word was that he was keeping it to miscreants. It was his last

triumph over these lunatics to go down into their dark room and die for something that they could not even understand.” (Chapter VI)

The poet perceives the deadly battle in the spiritual realm, along the sluggish Thames, or in a cheerful French café, or in a golden morning meadow. Spiritual warfare, for the poet, is a clarion call to arms. Syme’s blue police identification card states that he and his fellow intellectual policemen are engaged in “The Last Crusade.” Earlier in Chapter IV, Chesterton says Syme has declared a “holy war” against anarchists. The philosophical policeman Syme meets describes anarchists as “hating life – their own, as well as other people’s. ... That is why they throw bombs, instead of shooting pistols. The masses are disappointed because the bomb did not kill the king. The anarchist is happy because it has killed somebody” (Chapter IV). The pistol is a directed and pointed weapon; it is for fighting, not against men in general, but against a specific man embodying a specific idea. The bomb is a general weapon, a weapon of mass destruction, for destroying masses of things, and not one thing in particular. That is why the poet arms himself with a pistol; he wishes to fight only that which is evil. The anarchist prefers a bomb, for destroying life in general – any life, in as great a quantity as possible. There is an element of the holy war, the crusade, in the poet’s opposition to heresy. An evil idea is heretical; it is against right and truth, it is against religion. When Syme asks Gregory what the anarchists want to abolish, Gregory responds, “To abolish God! ... We hate Rights and we hate Wrongs. We have abolished Right and Wrong.” (Syme urges, with typical levity, “And Right and Left! I hope you will abolish them, too. They are much more troublesome to me.”) (Chapter II)

The crusader is aware of the intangible idea as clearly as if it were tangible. But does he always perceive rightly? Chesterton often presents characters who are aware of an intangible reality, but wholly misunderstand it: Syme initially sees enemies where there were friends, danger where there was safety, a charlatan where there was a sincere anarchist. A poet can perceive the solidity of both truth and anarchy; he sees that good and evil realities are directly dependent upon good and evil ideas. But he has a blind spot: he thinks he is the only one who can see it. So often does the poet feel burdened by the indifference of his fellow-man to the immediacy of the spiritual danger that vibrates against his every nerve, that he comes to believe that all others are blind to it. The poet feels that only he and agents of evil are alive to the danger of anarchy. He feels the danger is imminent, and that only by his prompt and energetic action can it be defeated, and its consequences averted.

The Poet is a Romantic because he is alone: he feels that, though right, he is the last crusader upon earth. He feels his effort a lost cause, a forlorn hope, a self-sacrificing charge. He knows what truth and reality are, that they are worth preserving at any cost, and that their opposition is real and terrible. Once Syme discovered the anarchists, he felt that he was the only one who opposed them in the wide world. It required a stupendous chase, begun by the terrible Professor de Worms and continued by the population of several French towns (Chapters VII-XII) – a wild and irrefutable sort of proof – for Syme to understand that the world was arrayed with him, against anarchy. He could hardly believe, and never suspected, that Professor de Worms was his friend; and his incredulity continued until each member of the Anarchist Council was revealed as an ally.

Though the poet and his companions had been deceived – not one of them was in fact an anarchist, and if the mysterious Sunday was an anarchist, at least he had also been a policeman – if they had been mistaken, they had not done wrong. *The Man Who Was Thursday* ends mysteriously and mystically with the omnipotence of Sunday, with whom the policemen and the anarchist have a discussion on the meaning of suffering. In response to many speculations on the meaning of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton warned against interpreting the book too literally; he complained that no one noticed the book’s subtitle, which designates it “A Nightmare.” In the *Illustrated London News* (June 13, 1936), Chesterton wrote: “[*The Man Who Was Thursday*] described... first a band of the last champions of order fighting against what appeared to be a world of anarchy, and then the discovery that the mysterious master both of the anarchy and the order was the

same sort of elemental elf who had appeared to be rather too like a pantomime ogre. This line of logic, or lunacy, led many to infer that this equivocal being was meant for a serious description of the Deity... But this error was entirely due to the fact that they had read the book but had not read the title-page." But at least, within the story itself, the poet-detectives did exactly as they were intended to do. If they were deceived, they were not duped. If they mistook each other for anarchists, at least they did not mistake anarchy for peace and rule of law. If they were mistaken about who was an anarchist, they were not mistaken about what was anarchy, and the only proper response to it. But Syme and his companions saw only the danger, the crisis, and not the further true fact that the evil they feared was already defeated, and that all the forces of creation were arrayed on the side of heaven.

In the glow of his "chivalric folly," Syme knew the power and the horror of anarchy, its unthinkable intentions, and incredible imminence. That is why the pocket pistol takes on such chivalric significance; it has become a tool, not to kill a man, but to combat an idea. The foe is the deceiver, the enemy of men's souls, whose aim is not to make men miserable, but to destroy them. His warfare is tangible, and could not be defeated by intangible striving; death, his ultimate aim, was defeated in a tangible, real death and resurrection, which could only be accomplished by One whom John describes: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." (John 1:14, KJV) For Chesterton's poet, the romance of the pocket-pistol is derived from the mystery of the incarnation: that an idea may become a man.

That is the romance of the pocket pistol – a tangible weapon to combat a tangible foe. The poet armed with the pocket pistol strides forth knowing that the beauty he sees most clearly is not a fancy, the result of nerves or digestion, but the visible symptoms of reality, of life. The enemy of life is also the father of lies. The poet who arms himself with the pocket pistol is prepared to defend truth with his life, and fight death itself to the death. The romance of the pocket pistol is the heady and satisfying romance that poetry is more real than prose.

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