Chesterton's Wild Ride: The Man Who Was a Thursday

by Lorenzo Buj (June 2022)

Funeral of the Anarchist Galli (I funerali del anarchico Galli), Carlo Carrà, 1910-11

I would like to acknowledge Lynette Hunter's 1979 study, G.K. Chesterton: Explorations in Allegory, *as an influence on my thinking about this novel.*

Introductory Comments

What is this book? A shrewd subterfuge? A precise, proto-Dadaist entertainment? A wild, self-subverting farce? Maybe all these and more: a theological comedy, small-d *divine*, happy in its ending and therefore fully obedient to the laws of genre? Yes, certainly the latter, and thereby also an exploded proverb (*Man proposes, God disposes*), a cliché writ so fantastically large that it balloons into a runaway allegory on how a monstrously obese, anarchic God outplots everyone. But "God" isn't easy to characterize, and this novel doesn't seem to be intended as a Sabbatarian theophany. Chesterton himself addressed the issue on the eve of his death in 1936, declaring *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) "a very melodramatic sort of moonshine" and urging it not be mistaken for "a serious description of the Deity." An error, readily correctible, if only his readers would bother looking to the plain sense of its subtitle: *A Nightmare*.

So there we have it: the dreamscape concept is key, to use an undergraduate colloquialism. But so too is the question of *Weltanschauung*, to borrow a term from that same German philosophical tradition that Chesterton's narrator mocks so unapologetically. Written at a time when Chesterton's own worldview was "unsettled," the novel was intended to evoke "the world of wild doubt and despair which the pessimists were generally describing at that date." That date being the thirty- or forty-year period running from the Franco-Prussian war to the novel's year of publication, time broad enough to include all manner of insurrectionists: cold-eyed Comteans and real-life Bazarovs, anarchists and materialists, flailing nihilists and methodical revolutionaries—for whom Hegel, and Schopenhauer, and Marx, and Nietzsche had prepared the way. It is this extra-diegetic montage of names and types, this keening horde of intellectual and actual dynamiters that overhang the book's depiction of the "purely intellectual conspiracy" that "would threaten the very existence of civilization" (Chapter 4).

The disaffected intellectuals swept up in the novel's ostensible conspiracy (as an analogue, think of the liberal professoriate that makes up today's arts and humanities programs, a society not unlike the unanimous grouping that Young Goodman Brown discovers in that woeful forest outside Salem) are already smugly certain of God's death. So the novel isn't really an allegory on the prankish character of a madcap Deity, but rather of something else, of something more intimately devilish—something more snugly billeted within *unheimlich* precincts of our own human ego.

To make it explicit: Chesterton's careening narrative, lurching breathlessly between metaphysics and multiple levels of topical allusion, is an allegory of radical skepticism—a labeling in which the term "skepticism" includes everything from Hegelian negation to Nietzschean nihilism, from fashionable modes of political terror to faddish tastes in cultural decadence; from the hubristic heights of atheistic humanism to the spiritual stench that emanates from our demystified modernity. Ay, there's the rub! "Radical skepticism," what can that refer to if not the relentless neurosis of modern subjectivity, a condition in which every last detail of one's life and times is prey to disbelief and ontological uncertainty?

As we will see, Chesterton's name for this world-destroying outlook, this dis-ease of the intellect and the spirit, is neither anarchy nor pessimism, but "Impressionism," a type of bewitchment in which realities unceasingly morph into their opposites and consciousness strays through an "an evil dream," straining to throw off "that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe" (Chapter 11).

Indeed, one's experience of reading the novel is a mimesis of this predicament, and the allegory of skepticism is structurally encoded—to greater and lesser degrees—into the novel's construction. The narrative architecture ranges through an ascending scale of allegory, with the basic design

consisting of four unequal components:

1. the opening poetics-politics debate (a late-Victorian sense of cultural decline, failing canons, skepticism of aesthetic values)
2. the dream-vision frame (skepticism gnawing at the citadel of the inner self; phenomenology overthrows the stable cogito; consciousness as a tenuous simulacrum)
3. the anarchist detection plot (revolutionary chaos in politics, thanks to Marx and Bakunin; violent outbreaks of nihilism—the assassination of heads-of-state; skepticism of the traditional social order)
4. the seating ritual at the festival of creation (beating back skepticism/atheism in religious matters, creationism reaffirmed, resisting scientific materialism)

The interlocking of all these elements reminds us that allegory, as the novel's major structural paradigm, is an extensional, problem-solving trope in which plot and narrative progression often play a crucial part (something that my plot-heavy discussion will bear out). Lorna Sage's encapsulation of how allegory 'works' is certainly worth quoting before we set out:

> Allegory's distinctive feature is that it is a structural, rather than a textural symbolism; it is a large-scale exposition in which problems are conceptualized and analysed into their constituent parts in order to be stated, if not solved. The typical plot is one in which the 'innocent' . . . is 'put through' a series of experiences (tests, traps, fantasy gratifications) which add up to an imaginative analysis of contemporary 'reality'. (*A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, ed. Roger Fowler, Routledge 1973)

We will see that this efficiently-worded description is well-nigh an exact fit for the allegorical mysteries at the heart of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Peeking ahead, I will only note that Chesterton (i.e., his narratorial persona) reserves "textural symbolism" for evocations of Gabriel Syme's point-of-view, especially his perceptual encounters with the ever-more-dream-like irrealities in which he is progressively immersed over the course of the plot.

Time and again, Syme's focal consciousness, i.e., his structural role as narrative focalizer—the lens, as it were, through which the novel is experienced (by the character) and conveyed (to the reader)—is vividly impacted by atmospheric transformations of landscape, skyscape, and urban surfaces; by the interplay of light/dark contrasts; as well as intensities of colour; and not least by sorceries of visual perspective. All of these he categorizes as instances of "impressionism," a term that would have still been fresh to Chesterton in the early twentieth century, as possessing serious aesthetic and epistemological implications. I would, in turn, take "impressionism" to refer to the protagonist's phenomenologically-evolving point-of-view (admittedly, a somewhat clumsy phrasing on my part). Careful readers note that Syme's depth-of-consciousness, his intellectual and aesthetic faculties, deepens even as the plot carries him along to greater and greater confusions.

Part 1

Chesterton prefaces the novel's central action—the oneiric adventure plot—by first walking us across a dream-vision threshold. At novel's opening, the narrator introduces us to the "fantastic skyline" and "wild ground plan" of Saffron Park, a would-be artists' colony in the suburbs of greater London. Throughout the opening chapter, and, indeed, through much of the action, the narrator maintains a light satiric

tone, while also offering up instances of portentous and self-evident symbolism. Thus, Saffron Park, with its satirized character types (e.g., the radical poet, the white-haired 'philosopher'), is presented against a dramatic atmospheric background. An extraordinary, billowing sunset overhangs a garden-party soiree, and Chesterton avails himself of rich coloration patterns (particularly the colour red) and art-historical references as he introduces his chief characters. (Such aesthetic flourishes grow in number and importance throughout the novel and in fact constitute what I think is Chesterton's central theme: the implicit nihilism of the modernist sensibility, which Chesterton, writing in 1908, subsumes under the term "Impressionism.")

We should also note that the narrator makes a brief first-person appearance (as a pronomial "I") in chapter one and that his satiric design is mostly exposited in the first four chapters, where Syme's anti-anarchist convictions are depicted as something quietly but persistently obsessive. Later on, especially in the foolery that sparks the duel in France, Syme is drawn comically but not satirically. The introductory satirical treatment preceding Syme's recruitment as undercover agent is there to fulfill one of the norms of allegory: he is like the lunatic of one idea and thus an 'innocent' (see the Sage quotation above) about to embark on his ordeals. His opposition to anarchism is, at this early stage of the action, single-mindedly intellectual and merely ideological (partly an effect of his upbringing by a freakish pair of parents, with their ridiculously polarized life philosophies). It has yet to be tested and thereby mature into something 'earned', but only after a series of hilarious reversals all along the way.

After the nightmarish plot starts thickening and discoveries proliferate, Syme's anti-anarchist psychology is supplanted by a deepening of his consciousness. Aesthetic cognition is often foregrounded in Syme's reactions—not so much in his reaction to plot twists, but in his impressions of figures, settings,

and objects. Ideological zeal against anarchy continues as the default driving-force of plot, but it dissolves as the book's major theme. Satire, too, largely disappears, and something that I loosely call 'phenomenology' takes over in the depiction of Syme's mission (specifically, his point-of-view). Theologically-centered allegory also moves to centre-stage as Syme, with the others, commits himself to the pursuit of the inscrutable trickster-President.

Going back to the book's beginnings: the term "dream" appears twice, first in the novel's opening paragraph and then again near the end of that same chapter after the garden party thins out and our protagonist—the aesthetically and politically conservative—Gabriel Syme finds himself exiting the garden alone and light-headed (as if tipsy from champagne), on the verge of re-encountering the black-clad figure of his counterpart and host, the poet Lucian Gregory. That re-encounter will include Syme's chiding of Gregory for blabbing on publicly about anarchy instead of keeping really serious things like religion or drink (and presumably a serious commitment to terrorism) in reserve.

Both Syme and Gregory bear allusive first-names recalling angelic personae of biblical mythology. As an emphatically self-declared anarchist, Gregory will, in the novel's "vision[ary]" conclusion,—also set in a sumptuous garden or parkland—disrupt the seating ritual in the role of *ha-satan*—"the accuser"—and spew direct "hate" at Syme and the other enthroned Days, all of whom Gregory denounces as a metaphysical and terrestrial ruling elite.

The novel's dream-vision frame expires with Syme's swooning hallucination of Sunday's massively expanding and indescribable face. Sunday is of course the novel's supreme absurdity and supreme mystery all at once. We first 'see' him at a lavish breakfast-club meeting in Leicester Square at which are assembled all the 'anarchists' with their various disguises and code names as days of the week. At story's end

this same group is cosmogonicly attired as the biblical days-of-creation, ritually installed and holding conversation before they are to partake of a great banquet.

To repeat: such is the transcendent outcome of Sunday's ritual in-gathering of his anarchists-detectives; all the detectives are seated according to their days-of-the-week aliases, which, as just mentioned, correspond to the order of creation in Genesis 1. Sunday speaks and so do the detectives themselves and, but for the obstreperous Secretary (Monday), with the disturbingly fulgurating smile, it seems that here, at the end of our tale, opposites are reconciled, history is sublimated, and the peace of the Lord's sabbath prevails.

Meanwhile, to repeat again: Gregory shows up as *ha-satan*, the accuser from the book of Job, spraying vitriol against governance and law, and against Sunday's apparent immunity to suffering. This vitriolic outburst is actually a continuation of the anarchist-accuser's unfinished fury in chapters one (when Syme upstages him at the garden party, disparaging anarchy as, among other things, "vomit") and two (when Syme usurps his role at the underground anarchist cell meeting after Gregory's weak and underplayed election speech). We should additionally note that a line from Christ's passion prediction in Mark 10 ("Can you drink of the cup … ?") echoes in Syme's mind as he swoons into total mental blackness before awakening from his dream-adventures; and when he awakes he finds the poet Gregory harmlessly by his side as they walk on the country outskirts of Saffron Park.

Within the book's over-arching dream-vision framework is embedded a typically suspenseful 'ticking time-bomb' thriller plot which climaxes on the jetty of a French coastal town, where it is discovered that the detectives were chasing their own tail all along: the ostensible anarchists turn out to have been policemen appointed by Sunday himself as he sits invisible in a pitch-dark room in Scotland Yard. Following the 'we're all cops' discovery in chapter twelve, the novel's last

three chapters serve as an allegorical denouement, in which a wild goose chase through London and into the English countryside culminates in what I have already described as the ritualistic sitting of God's heavenly court.

The court is installed in a prelapsarian country manor setting. After all the nightmare scenarios he has passed through, Syme finds himself in the role of a metaphysical Thursday—or day four of the Christian reading of Genesis 1—but also feels that his psyche and his former bouts of nightmarish fear have been cleansed by a restorative sense of childhood wonder and innocence. The novel's closing section includes a quiet but unmistakable Gospel allusion as the narrator intones of Syme's feeling himself "in possession of some impossible *good news*." [italics mine]

And that takes us to the very end of the book. So what I've just described at length is its structural logic: two diametrically opposed poetic and political outlooks bandying back-and-forth, prefacing a dream-vision framework that encloses an ironical thriller plot, which climaxes and gives way to a closing allegorical ritual. What can all these enfoldings mean? What is Chesterton up to with all this symbol-heavy craziness and tangled plotting in the first decade of the twentieth century?

More to the point, the literary-critical question is this: what do dream (i.e., 'nightmare' according to the subtitle), allegory, and ritual have in common? Answer: they are all symbolic modes operating like tropes with explicit or manifest content 'pointing' to another level of conceptual significance. They're all in their own way signifying systems, with a material basis supporting a semantic message. In order to make sense, all three—dream, ritual, and allegory—must be interpreted as coded systems of meaning. They are incomplete experiences without such an interpretative action. The dream is a psychological code; ritual has a spiritual or mythic code behind it; and allegory offers, let's just say, an

intellectual or ethical code.

Part 2

The pivotal figure as far as the novel's allegorical design is concerned is of course Sunday and yet his allegorical significance, multi-faceted and cosmic in range, remains in the end indeterminate. His mysterious, allegorical inexhaustibility is the tempting hermeneutic aporia of the entire novel, yet the novel is not primarily about him but rather about Gabriel Syme, the chief protagonist and narrative focalizer.

Syme is the protagonist of the novel's dream code; and he is presented as a poet whose consciousness is perpetually grappling with radical uncertainty. This brings us to what I think of as the thesis behind the entire novel, namely that *The Man Who Was Thursday* suggests that conclusive interpretation of the nature of modern as well as ultimate reality is impossible, but that we can transcend skepticism, nihilism, and relativism through ritual, for it is in a ritualized reversion to Genesis 1 that the novel concludes. Syme takes his happy place with other members at God's heavenly council.

So *The Man Who Was Thursday* moves forward as what seems an ideological allegory but by the end we discover that political anarchism is but a symptom of the more radical uncertainties troubling the modern *Zeitgeist*. The revelation gets played out in Syme's consciousness as he fights his way through an escalating series of bewilderments. Tensions mount during his initial appearance at Saffron Park and uncertainties multiply from his corkscrewing restaurant table experience to his arrival at the foreign-looking Leicester Square to his first contemplation of the enormous bulk presented by Sunday during that first breakfast. In all cases the narrator is

concentrating our attention on Syme's acts of consciousness—and we may safely say that Chesterton's technique is phenomenological.

What I mean by this is as follows. Taken as a narratological device, Syme's point-of-view does its steady, focalizing work throughout the novel; the detective is indefatigable in his mission, despite the dizzying, dream-like events that befall him. At the same time Chesterton periodically slows or pauses the action with lengthy, descriptive passages devoted to Syme's moments of disorientation and reorientation. The effect here becomes phenomenological. We 'see' consciousness undergoing sudden bouts of ontological uncertainty and intentional slippage. Syme's perceptions of reality are repeatedly destabilized and—to use the terminology of Russian Formalism—defamiliarized. For example, his familiar, conscious hold on the architectural topography of London is periodically subject to estrangement (*ostranenie*). There's the Embankment scene when he gets off the steam tug, shortly to meet Monday; the glimpse of St Paul's dome after he navigates a mazelike warren of little streets while hapless to throw Professor de Worms off his tail; the apartment complex where Bull resides, etc.

The middle of these anticipates the effects wrought by Kafka, but resolves on a note of religious reassurance:

> The sky above was loaded with the clouds of snow, leaving London in a darkness and oppression premature for that hour of the evening. On each side of Syme the walls of the alley were blind and featureless; there was no little window or any kind of eve. He felt a new impulse to break out of this hive of houses, and to get once more into the open and lamp-lit street. Yet he rambled and dodged for a long time before he struck the main thoroughfare. When he did so, he struck it much farther up than he had fancied. He came out into what seemed the vast and void of Ludgate Circus, and saw St. Paul's Cathedral sitting in the sky.

> At first he was startled to find these great roads so empty, as if a pestilence had swept through the city. Then he told himself that some degree of emptiness was natural; first because the snow-storm was even dangerously deep, and secondly because it was Sunday. And at the very word Sunday he bit his lip; the word was henceforth for him like some indecent pun. Under the white fog of snow high up in the heaven the whole atmosphere of the city was turned to a very queer kind of green twilight, as of men under the sea. The sealed and sullen sunset behind the dark dome of St. Paul's had in it smoky and sinister colours—colours of sickly green, dead red or decaying bronze, that were just bright enough to emphasise the solid whiteness of the snow. But right up against these dreary colours rose the black bulk of the cathedral; and upon the top of the cathedral was a random splash and great stain of snow, still clinging as to an Alpine peak. It had fallen accidentally, but just so fallen as to half drape the dome from its very topmost point, and to pick out in perfect silver the great orb and the cross. When Syme saw it he suddenly straightened himself, and made with his sword-stick an involuntary salute.

The culminating moment of modernist-consciousness-in-crisis occurs after the sword fight with the fake Marquis, as Syme, his detective compatriots, and a couple of Frenchmen march through a wood, fleeing what seems to be a posse of well-drilled anarchists, some of whom wear black masks. In this wood Syme undergoes an extraordinary epiphany about the insubstantial and fugitive nature of reality. His epiphany is rendered as an encounter with 'impressionism', a term that in this case includes not only its aesthetic denotations as in the modern art movement of that name but also encompasses any number of ontological doubts. The passage is absolutely brilliant and stands as a baffled, psychologically self-searching expression of modern man's deep skepticism about 'reality':

The others gave one glance over their shoulders, and saw that the dark cloud of men had detached itself from the station and was moving with a mysterious discipline across the plain. They saw already, even with the naked eye, black blots on the foremost faces, which marked the masks they wore. They turned and followed their leader, who had already struck the wood, and disappeared among the twinkling trees.

The sun on the grass was dry and hot. So in plunging into the wood they had a cool shock of shadow, as of divers who plunge into a dim pool. The inside of the wood was full of shattered sunlight and shaken shadows. They made a sort of shuddering veil, almost recalling the dizziness of a cinematograph. Even the solid figures walking with him Syme could hardly see for the patterns of sun and shade that danced upon them. Now a man’s head was lit as with a light of Rembrandt, leaving all else obliterated; now again he had strong and staring white hands with the face of a negro. The ex-Marquis had pulled the old straw hat over his eyes, and the black shade of the brim cut his face so squarely in two that it seemed to be wearing one of the black half-masks of their pursuers. The fancy tinted Syme’s overwhelming sense of wonder. Was he wearing a mask? Was anyone wearing a mask? Was anyone anything? This wood of witchery, in which men’s faces turned black and white by turns, in which their figures first swelled into sunlight and then faded into formless night, this mere chaos of chiaroscuro (after the clear daylight outside), seemed to Syme a perfect symbol of the world in which he had been moving for three days, this world where men took off their beards and their spectacles and their noses, and turned into other people. That tragic self-confidence which he had felt when he believed that the Marquis was a devil had strangely disappeared now that he knew that the Marquis was a friend. He felt almost inclined to ask after all these bewilderments what was a friend and what an enemy. Was

> there anything that was apart from what it seemed? The Marquis had taken off his nose and turned out to be a detective. Might he not just as well take off his head and turn out to be a hobgoblin? Was not everything, after all, like this bewildering woodland, this dance of dark and light? Everything only a glimpse, the glimpse always unforeseen, and always forgotten. For Gabriel Syme had found in the heart of that sun-splashed wood what many modern painters had found there. He had found the thing which the modern people call Impressionism, which is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe.

So there we have it—the world, reality itself, as a bottomless 'wood of witchery'. And what can "Impressionism" mean in this context except the following?—The so-called objective world 'out there' and the subjective world 'in here' consist of an ever-changing flux or flow of sensation and perception with no higher significance than their momentary aesthetic unity. There is no possible stasis to this phenomenalism, no foundation, no depth of substance to reality—only a kaleidoscopic succession of brief forms.

Syme's mind gapes in wonder and alarm. When you get right down to it, there's no "it" there; there's nothing "down" there but what the new physics is discovering at just about the time that Chesterton writes the novel. Reality is a virtual zone of quantum uncertainties. Modern experience is a barely narcotized sense of panic. Modern ('secular') reality is sensuous, and richly aestheticized, in our arts and appreciations, but it is also resoundingly empty of substance and transcendental meaning. It has been so from Feuerbach and Marx, down to Darwin, Nietzsche, Bakunin, Pater, Freud, Bergson, wave upon wave of modernist art movements, etc., etc., not to mention Einstein's relativity theory (published 1905) and the subatomic worlds of his fellow post-Newtonian physicists. 'Reality' seems to be irresolvably anarchic no

matter how high or low you go (‘The way up and the way down are the same’, quoth ancient Heraclitus). This is the universal crisis that the endlessly elusive figure of Sunday is meant to transcend with his festival of creation and his impassible sabbath-day peace.

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