

# G. K. CHESTERTON AND GEORGE ORWELL: A CONTRAST IN PROPHECY

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G. K. CHESTERTON begins his *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* by describing the game of 'Cheat the Prophet.' This game is, in fact, not practised by humanity at large, which, far from ignoring the prophets and thus confounding them, is enormously attracted to false prophets and gives the true ones much angry attention, though seldom a hearing. The matter of 'Testing the Prophet', however, is conscientiously performed by history itself for mankind's edification. The decline of the position of the prophets in Israel has been attributed to the failure of the majority to survive the judgement of history.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half a century has elapsed since *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* claimed to see a hundred years into the future. It is time enough to see how this particular prophecy has worn and how its message compares with present-day foretelling of the future.

One limitation of Chesterton's vision appears at the outset of his story, when he says the world to be would be little changed in appearance. He failed to appreciate the situation created by modern technology. In trying to laugh away H. G. Wells' optimistic faith in science, he did not distinguish between Wells' true conviction that the motorcar's pace would be superseded as the horse's had been and the shallow assumption that the wonderful increase in speed of travel must be wonderfully good. Chesterton's 'Dr. Pellkins' who held that the largest pig in the litter must some day become larger than an elephant was correct, so far as breeding-habits of scientific method were concerned, and here Chesterton's jibe sounds flat in modern ears. It is highly dangerous in a prophet to ignore the material conditions within which the spirit must operate; the prophetic word must reach men as they are and where they are. Having nothing to say of the truth (which Marxists have made into an idol) of the determination of culture by the means of production employed, Chesterton's *Napoleon* forfeits from the start the claim to comment profoundly upon society and becomes a

1. See Aubrey R. Johnson *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (1944) Chap. IV.

romantic fable. A fable which does not try to reproduce reality in its complexity may yet have a deep wisdom of its own. But here the fable is romantic in the worst sense. It is not true to life in its externals--a small matter. More important, the ideals it exalts in the shadow world of its creation are not controlled by the moral realities of any conceivable universe and appear attractive only in proportion to the unreality of the setting.

Like *News from Nowhere*, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* presents a dream-world from which economic and kindred problems have been banished. In all the upheavals of the Notting Hill Empire there is plenty of tea in the shops and gas in the Gas-works. Morris' leisurely scene of pastoral placidity was drawn by one who hated industrial society and followed the Marxist analysis, naively hoping that by economic action economics would cease to be a problem; sharing, indeed, the Marxist illusion that Satan is the only one who can cast out Satan. Chesterton was also in revulsion against the civilization which nineteenth-century capitalism had created. But he preferred to ignore its causes and concentrated on describing a society transformed, without working out any rational notion of how societies are created or maintain themselves. Morris postulated a revolution as a prelude to Utopia, a revolution which was like the real thing, nasty, but (in his view) necessary. Chesterton's revolution is as impossible (and as entertaining) as the school-boy comic's account of the school where the boys take charge. In a London which exactly reproduces the London of 1904, but which is ruled "by a popular despotism without illusions", because "the people had lost faith in revolutions," Auberon Quin as head of the state introduces halberdiers and other medieval trappings for the Boroughs, as a joke. Adam Wayne of Notting Hill accepts the joke seriously. He takes up arms on a question of local rights and in a series of street battles defeats all the rest and establishes an Empire on the basis of medieval chivalry. It is all fine and frolicsome, yet under the legerdemain the writer is putting his case and displaying his values. We are easily persuaded that the philosophy underlying it is as pleasant as the plot and we may forget that prophecy must be tested, not only upon the pulses, but also upon complex recording-tape of history.

Many shared Chesterton's dissatisfaction with a world that "had lost faith in revolutions"—real revolutions which men desired in their hearts and fought for with their hands,

not the souless slavery to the machinery of commerce which was the consequence of the 'Industrial Revolution'. Back then to the Middle Ages when life was single and beliefs really mattered and art was not the drudge of money-power! For the romantically inclined, these Middle Ages were of course Golden Ages containing only values we had seemingly lost and lacking only what we could do without in the interests of a simpler life. We could well jettison the gun, the aeroplane, the lounge suit, and perhaps as a gesture (one must show one is in earnest) plumbing, electricity and surgery as well. Others who knew we could not put the clock back materially, thought we should do so spiritually. Berdyaev proclaimed that we were standing at the threshold of a New Middle Age when the bourgeois values of liberalism must vanish and belief once again take central place. He recognised that this was also the coming of a "spiritual night" and would bring misery before better ways were born again among men. Chesterton saw no blackness in the picture. And his medieval Utopia was built on belief indeed, but on a kind of belief suited to the uncomplicated mind of a Tarzan. Though Christian terms are repeatedly used, the values they propose are mainly pagan ones, where love as *agape* has no place, and mind and spirit little function except that of waiting upon the emotions. A strongly-felt loyalty is absolute, although the worth of the object of loyalty is unexamined. Religion appears chiefly as a sanction for self-assertiveness. Everywhere feeling is paramount: "Whatever makes men feel young is great: a great war or a great love-story." Even the plot takes a pagan form. Adam Wayne's early victory over great odds and ultimate gallant defeat under great odds shows the basic pattern of Germanic mythology, to which the gods themselves conform. Adam Wayne is nearer to Beowulf than to any other ideal figure. Physical violence is almost *the* good in life. It is to the credit of the Empire of Notting Hill that "as it began in blood, so it ended in blood." To take the sword and perish by the sword is the glory and the purpose of existence. A Christian values in humble gratitude the shed blood of martyrs and of every witness to truth and righteousness, for their sacrifice is taken up into the sacrifice of the One who shed His blood for us all. For Chesterton, shed blood has value in itself, because it is emotionally satisfying: "Blood has been running, and is running, in great red serpents, that curl out into the main thoroughfare and shine in the moon." The words are Auberon Quinn's, the great jester at last impressed

by something seriously interesting. There is no hint of what this fine sight means in human terms of pain and mutilation, savagery and bereavement. The fighting in Notting Hill is seen always as a spectacle; never too near, so that unpleasant details are lost; never too distantly so that the consequences are ignored. There are no women in the book. It is not to be thought that war brings with it famine, disease and a legacy of fear. Since this is old-fashioned hand-to-hand fighting and not modern mechanised warfare it must be gentlemanly. (It might be instructive to illustrate *The Napoleon* with Goya's *Disasters of War*.)

Chesterton's pagan romanticism is shown at its height in the dedicatory poem to Hilaire Belloc, where he grows warm to "your tall young men"—the adjectives obtrude for short, middle-aged soldiers would spoil the picture—who "drank death like wine at Austerlitz" and looks forward to the omnipotence of emotion:

The drums shall crash a waltz of war  
And Death shall dance with Liberty . . .  
And death and hate and hell declare  
That men have found a thing to love.

It is a flamboyant revulsion from the thought of "what cold mechanic happenings must come." The prophecy has come true, for we have seen the conversion of millions to a perfervid belief in revolutions. And in Fascism we have seen the enthronement of feeling as the arbiter of values. We have seen blood in the streets and death and hate and hell written across the nations because men found a belief to cherish with passionate intensity. We have seen it as a romantic outburst, complete with banners and dressing up and torchlight in true Notting Hill style, but within the setting of a civilization ordered by modern technology, of continually increasing power to manipulate the environment—and man himself—in units of increasing size and complexity. Hitler was as single-minded and as humorless as Adam Wayne and as much more dangerous as scientific knowledge had made him. Yet even Adam Wayne, flapping his archaic flag, was more dangerous than his creator allowed him to appear. Lip service to religious ideals does little to make the conduct of the successful strongman different from the openly cynical tyrant; much blood that has run under the contemporary moon has been shed

in the name of Christian loyalty.<sup>1</sup> Beside Wayne stands Auberon Quin—"a man who cares for nothing except a joke. He is a dangerous man." After their death the two became reconciled, as being two sides of the same medal. The totally irresponsible man and the blind fanatic are certainly one at bottom and the world will suffer from them, either separately or blended in one personality, as long as human nature surrenders itself to false values. Quin without Wayne, however, does little damage. It is the revival of blind fanaticism whether based on emotionalism, as in fascism, or on a quasi-rationalism, as in communism, which has brought the world to the edge of the abyss.

*The Napoleon* charms because of its exotic escapism—swords, cloaks, rhetoric, water-towers plated in silver and grocers who learn to speak like some one out of *Massan*. Its teaching seems to suggest that a return to a strong, simple, basic living will result from a destruction of decadent, money-controlled, magalopolitan civilization. It seems so easy, since all that is needed is a resumption of local patriotism and the ethics of the strong right arm. National Socialism made use of this idealistic appeal too, but it equally used the darker enticement of the permission of cruelty to the strong. There is nothing of this in Chesterton, whose basic convictions, in spite of everything, were still liberal, humanitarian and nineteenth-century. Fundamentally, he also did not believe in revolutions. Whether under the gaudy feudalism of Wayne or under the full despotism of pre-Wayne, the essential landmarks of democratic London and its characteristic habits of mind remain. A jester on paper is not dangerous, except where his jokes strike at simple goodness, mercy and truth. Chesterton's background of Victorian tolerance remained even when his dislike of what the Victorians has achieved led him to approve of intolerance. This can be seen in his ambiguous attitude to Italian fascism. He could not condemn the Abyssinian war. Yet he would have been appalled at the suggestion that Vittorio Mussolini's pleasure in burning a village of four thousand souls had his full approval. There is no essential difference, all the same, between the dictator's son's reaction to slaughter and Auberon Quin's. Vittorio's words, "It was all extremely interesting", sum up the two—and he even achieves in his descriptions some of Quin's pictorial effects. But Chesterton wanted to play with children, not with incendiary bombs; even his sword-stick

1. See for instance a Catholic's reaction to the 'Spanish Crusade' George Bernanos *Les Grande Cimetières sous la Lune* (1938).

was a gesture, not a weapon. He looked at the Middle Ages, both Old and New, through the spectacles of suburban English tastes.

George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* brings us right into the New Middle Ages, forcing us to look into all that Chesterton would rather ignore. It is characteristic of the pace of our day that this new prophecy does not look a hundred years ahead, or even fifty. It predicts Berdyaev's 'spiritual night' from the knowledge that spiritual twilight is already upon us. It is not romantic, in that it envisages a possible situation, even if the possibility is a nightmare. It acknowledges the fact that it is technological advance which lays down the conditions of society—seeing also the sole limit that can be set to its course, the regimentation of specialist research. But while this prophecy is realistic in intention and tone, its central pre-occupation is religious. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, like Hitler, often spoke about God while retaining a pagan level of thought. Orwell, like the Communists, does not deal in religious phrases, but Judaic-Christian patterns of thought are only just below the surface.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagines the world divided into a few great rival totalitarian Powers, continually at war. This external war is not a threat to the existence of any, being rather a condition of the continuance of all. The real war is an internal one, the retention and extension of the Party power over its members, a war against the emergence of freedom. The book deals with the attempted revolt of one citizen, Winston Smith, against the order, and its suppression. As O'Brien, the Inner Party member who superintends this small but all-important campaign, points out, physical obedience is not the essential thing. Technology has made that a relatively simple matter. The Thought Police are not concerned to stamp out disobedience, but heresy. Killing the body is a power which tyranny has always possessed. The new campaign is waged against the personality of man, lest he should think his soul his own. This makes clear to us what faith in revolution really means and what happens when belief is taken seriously. This is the New Middle Ages, which sees in the authoritarianism of its predecessor a pale version of its proper task. It is not simply that the new way has an evil intent, while the old purposed good. 'The Party' does not only prefer to rule in hell than to serve in heaven; it sees clearly that it is only in hell that one can rule. To enjoy power is to enjoy causing suffering, therefore the aim

of the powerful is to rule by promoting strife, pain and misery, by stimulating revolt in order to crush it and by turning every instinct into unreflecting loyalty to authority. That Winston Smith must learn to *love* the Party leader is the command of the authority which torments him. "Whatever makes men feel young is great," said Chesterton. O'Brien enjoys an extended youth by identifying himself with the Party whose agent he is and whose stability in tyranny modern technology has ensured. No "cold mechanic happenings" here, but the full enjoyment drained from the wine of death; Quin-Wayne watches the curling of the serpent of humanity's blood for his delectation; Vittorio Mussolini exclaims "This is extremely interesting."

*Nineteen-Eighty-Four* speaks to our condition. It reflects the situation which a large part of the human race have to endure at the present moment, the unholy alliance of modern scientific power with the Medieval demand for the submission of individual liberty to a spiritual authority punishing heresy with death and degradation. Even those scientists, whose thought is tied to the illusion that knowledge and progress are synonymous terms are to-day entertaining doubts. Every discovery of science is a weapon for the torturer as well as for the healer, as we see when psychology and the social sciences are brought in to support guns and drugs in "conditioning" 'enemies of the state'. As a prophet Orwell is far more clear-sighted than Chesterton, because he has seen the real cancer of our age. He has had the advantage of seeing the evil fruit of tendencies which earlier seemed promising growths—the enthusiasm that would die for, and kill for, a faith and the substitution of passionate feeling for tolerant reason. Orwell finds that the pagan virtues of the strong right arm and loyalty to one's own clan, turn to cold cruelty and blind submission. Pride, the spiritual sin of rebellion against God and the desire to become as gods, is laid bare as the root of our misery. But just because Orwell has no residual nineteenth-century illusions about the decency of man when he had power and no responsibilities, so the humanity and optimism that abound (and sometimes irritate) in Chesterton are absent. The nineteenth-century tolerance and kindness and all that has been labelled 'liberal' which many have been so anxious to sweep away in the name of the Faith, either Christian or anti-Christian, was not a transient foible of the age. It was the fine flowering of centuries of Christian witness. If the Victorians thought the flowers were

enough by themselves, cut off from their roots, or imagined that no further cultivation was required, that did not affect the worth of what was achieved. Orwell has no message of assurance. It might be objected that the scope of the book precludes any such thing, the moral by implication being: take warning; cherish the humane values or expect the coming judgment. But form is not accidental. *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* invites us to identify ourselves so fully with Winston Smith that we share his spiritual defeat. The form Orwell has chosen meets us at every turn in an age which has shed its illusions without achieving faith, an age which knows evil but not God. In literature its purest expression is found in Kafka's *The Trial* (of which *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* reads like a revised version, in which the action is merely lifted out of the interior world and put into the objective plane); but it is the staple theme of the greater part of 'serious' fiction to-day, quite apart from such romantic outpourings as Huxley's *Ape and Essence*. In fashionable philosophy it is systematised in Existentialism. In history it confronts us in the tragedy of Benes and Jan Masaryk. It is a pattern which must be broken, if the world is to make its way, painfully as it must, to sanity instead of suicide.

Romantic escapism, a return to sub-Christian values or to an external authority which identifies itself with Christian truth is no solution. The prophetic word which will speak to us through the 'spiritual night' of our age must speak to our desperate sickness. It must also maintain: "*So God be with us, who can be against us!*"