

Joanna Kokot

## CHESTERTON AND PERSONAL CONTACT

### ART *VERSUS* ART IN *THE FLYING INN*

In this paper, which deals with Gilbert Keith Chesterton and the relevance of his writings in present times, I would like to concentrate not on his essays but on his literary texts (or more precisely - his fiction). There is at least one good reason for this. A work of art with all its complicated relationships may be viewed as some kind of reality<sup>1</sup>. Therefore the vision of the world presented in a novel (or a poem) not only may be richer than that explained in an essay, but it is also something to experience and not just to understand. There is also a reason why I would rather concentrate on one text, and on what is unique in its vision of the world, than talk about Chesterton's literary output in general - especially because it is his prose and not poetry that I propose to discuss. When we think about the role of Chesterton's writings today, we should not only answer the question whether his *ideas* are still worth considering, but also whether his *books* (or rather literary texts) are still worth reading (which is not always the same thing). And the answer to the latter question - especially in such a brief essay - never concerns *books*, but *a book* (as Mary Smith would have put it were she to speak about books and not men). After all, a reader rarely has to do with more than one book at a time.

---

1

Not to mention the created world and its spatio-temporal setting, the characters and events "enclosed" in one text.

## I

It is a commonplace that the 20th century has witnessed many rapid changes in the cultural model of the world - changes which date from the beginning of our age.

Quite early, our times have been defined as an "age of possibilities" (Ortega 39 *et passim*) - neither a decadent epoch longing for the golden past nor a self-satisfied age of fulfilment. However, the enormous variety of choices which our century has to offer to people on the one hand makes people look rather forwards than backwards, thus losing their roots in tradition and the past; and on the other, it provokes them to concentrate on the possibilities as such rather than on using them to some consistent aim. (Thus this "looking forward" appears to be rather illusionary; what happens is the concentration on the "here-and-now"). All this of course has its consequences for the modern vision of reality.

The traditional system of absolute values found its end in the collapse of the self-satisfied nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. It had to, as the style of life imposed by the possibilities offered by our age would not bear any restrictions. This process evidently was also promoted by the attitudes of the *fin-de-siècle* and modernist artists (and not only artists), the aftermath of which can be seen in the post-modernist axiology which tries to substitute aesthetics for ethics. "*De gustibus non disputandum*", so most of the possible choices (apart from those which would evidently endanger a given community) should be treated with the same benign tolerance, no matter how much they would violate the traditional system of ethical and moral rules.

Also the "cultural relativity" connected - among other things - with the rapid de-colonization of the world and with an apparently better flow of information has resulted not only in a general appreciation of a multicultural world, but also in an axiological relativity: no system of values is good or bad, right or wrong in itself, but it ought to be considered in the context of the culture that bore it (cf. Finkelkraut *passim*). Western culture itself is said to undergo a process of

disintegration (cf. Steiner, esp. 49-74, 75-107)<sup>1</sup>, no more proposing a consistent model of reality; people lose a sense of tradition, getting open to many alien influences, becoming fascinated by exotic systems of thought, and adapting them to their needs and longings.

Moreover, something wrong has happened to the very sense of reality. Linguistic theories (originating from the works of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf) have proved that not only the vision of the world is transmitted by language, but also the perception of reality depends on the language in terms of which the experience is expressed. This theory has found its modern continuation in the notion that there is no attainable truth about reality: we always experience language or other systems used to describe the world around us (cf. e.g. the propositions of Hillis-Miller, Sukenick or Federman). The more or less obvious conclusion formulated by the propagators of this proposition - that we live in the pseudo-world of fictions - seems to be well illustrated by post-modernist prose, which is a set of conscious constructs: with allusions, quotations, self-negations and the like, always imposing distance towards the model of the created reality, and usually denying any reality behind that model.

Such a vision of language and art should also deny any possibility of communication - and indeed modern art is often deprived of any communicative aspect. Works of art - no matter whether they are literary texts or "texts" of visual art - often do not express any vision of the world, they are not to be "read" or interpreted. Or rather, the interpretation ought to be tantamount to supplying the object of art with the meanings which the observer chooses to endow it with. In this way the process of communication - which was once an indispensable part of the reception of art - is replaced by participation; however the participant often appears to be a strangely solipsistic being, never

---

1

These are the essays "In a Post-culture" and "Tomorrow". It seems that this process was foreshadowed by J. Ortega, when he claimed that (in the 30's) Europe had no spiritual power in the world any more. Cf. Ortega 134, and the later references to Spengler's ideas (137 *et passim*).

tempted to understand somebody else's vision of the world, or to formulate his own message for another person.

Certainly, Chesterton's novels and stories can offer to a reader a clear escape from modern permissive tendencies and from a sense of uncertainty. First of all, he never indulges in any kind of relativistic attitude and detachment. If we have a closer look at his prose, we can easily discover that almost every text presents a *conflict* of attitudes towards the world. It may be even a conflict between engagement and indifference - as that in *The Ball and the Cross*, where the two opponents are met with an attitude that can almost be described by the modern term of "political correctness". In Chesterton's reality there is no relativity of the system of values, no matter which system is chosen. Respect for a person of other views can never be accompanied by a benign abandonment of one's own vision of the world - or by a refusal to take responsibility for the system of values it assumes. There is something of this in Chesterton's description of the final battle in *The Flying Inn*, when he writes that "[the] beech-trees were splashed up to their lower branches with the mingling of *brave* heathen and *brave* Christian blood" (309).

The vision of the world which is proposed and imposed on both the readers and the characters of Chesterton's tales is opposed to any reducing of the world to a cultural model. One of the "simple truths" of which the writer reminds us is the fact that there is not only a definite set of values, but also a tangible and "living" reality and living men around us, and that their nature is prior to any ordering systems and categories in terms of which they may be perceived. Perhaps the best example of such re-establishing of the immediate and unconventional vision of reality which allows the perceiver to grasp the truth (not necessarily the essential, metaphysical truth, but just the truth about facts) is the Father Brown cycle of stories, where the little priest, with a mind unmarred by any superstitions or stereotypes, but open to observation and common sense, solves one puzzle after the other. The often unusual behaviour of the culprit is counterparted by the equally unconventional thinking of Father Brown, who - unlike his alleged predecessor, Sherlock Holmes, with his method of deduction - depends rather on his intuition and acquired experience than on the

abstract laws of logic, and yet (paradoxically) never abandons or suspends reason. And it is not any special intellectual quality, but his gift of observation and the ability to look at things from "another" point of view that allow him to see both single facts and relationships between them, so that they reveal the consistent patterns underlying them.

Of course, all this could qualify Chesterton's fiction as an antidote to contemporary relativism, and would perhaps explain why his works are still worth reading today. But there is more to it than that. It is not only that the Chestertonian vision of the world is opposed to the conventions, stereotypes or preconceived notions typical of the reality of the modern reader but also that his literary works foreshadow these tendencies. I would like to concentrate on a text which introduces another means of "departing" from the tangible world and from the immediate experience of it, as well as from the traditionally accepted system of values - a text which is concerned with the wilful creation of an artificial reality that is supposed to replace the actual world, the acknowledged order of things defined both by nature and by tradition. And also a text which undertakes the issue of art and its function, revealing the writer's attitudes and communicating them to the addressee. In other words - *The Flying Inn*, a novel which indirectly comments upon Chesterton's literary output through what is said (or rather suggested) there about art and literature and their role in the communicative process.

## II

However, before we undertake the theme of *art* and Chesterton's attitude towards it - as it is expressed in *The Flying Inn* (and perhaps also elsewhere) - it would be advisable to see it in a broader context. To a more or less careful reader it is obvious that artistic creation is not the only kind of creation which is exercised in the world of *The Flying Inn*. Sometimes it does not consist in producing "new worlds"

such as poems or paintings, but in changing reality according to some abstract models assumed by the creators.

Let us start with the verbal constructs of the gifted confabulator, Misysra Ammon, who endows mere word play with the quality of being the only truth about the reality. The preachings of the new Prophet, so lavishly quoted in the novel, have one very important feature in common. They are self-contained, and thus consistent not with the outward world, but within themselves. Being absolutely logical, they have nothing to do with the outward reality, although they create the impression of being its perfect explanation. So perfect that most of Misysra's listeners are persuaded to accept this artificial world created with words and pseudo-arguments. It is significant that practically the only person who refuses to do so and who eventually discovers a flaw in this thoroughly-built construction is Lady Joan Brett, the one who - unlike the other people from Lord Ivywood's *milieu* - never utterly loses contact with the tangible reality:

[...] the lecturer [i.e. Misysra] really did know a very great deal about English history and literature: much more than she did: much more than the aristocrats around her did. But she noted that in every case what he knew was a fragmentary fact. In every case what he did not know was the truth behind the fact. What he did not know was the atmosphere. What he did not know was the tradition. (*The Flying Inn* 118-119)

And - to supply Lady Joan's thoughts - what he lacked was the sense of reality. It is the same flaw, accompanied by cynicism, which the reader can see in the Peaceways project of Meadows the millionaire, in the antics of the philanthropists who build up the brotherhood of man by rejecting those tastes common to themselves and the poor, or in the Simple Souls society so violently criticised by Patrick Dalroy:

The cynical fellows who think themselves so damned clever have a sort of saying, "Be good and you will be happy; but you will not have a jolly time." The cynical fellows are quite wrong, as they generally are. They have got hold of the exact opposite of the truth. (*Ibid.* 61)

These are, however, only faint echoes of the activities of one person who has the ambition totally to reshape the reality around him - Lord Philip Ivywood. But what is it that Lord Ivywood does, apart from the rather obvious fact of turning England into a teetotaler's paradise by abolishing all the inns in the country? Obviously that could hardly be the reason for him to call himself "a hero" or "the greatest man in the world", as he does during his conversation with Lady Joan. So what is that he wants to achieve and what does he really achieve?

If we "look" at Lord Ivywood - or rather if we read the descriptions presenting him - there is one striking thing about him, a feature which distinguishes him from the others. He is colourless - especially in contrast with the other characters: the red-headed Patrick or the swarthy-complexioned Joan. This feature appears already in the first description of the man, together with a suggestion motivating it:

Lord Ivywood, the English Minister, was probably the handsomest man in England; save he was almost colourless both in hair and complexion. Against the blue marble sea he might almost have been one of its marble statues that are faultless in line but show nothing but shades of grey and white. It seemed a mere matter of the luck of lighting whether his hair looked dull silver or pale brown; and his splendid mask never changed in colour or expression. (Ibid. 22)

The word "statue" is significant here. Both the definition of Lord Ivywood's appearance as resembling a statue and the setting which is the background of the described scene (the Greek islands) bring about associations with ancient Greece and its statues of heroes - that is demigods - and of gods themselves. Dalroy at some moment calls Ivywood "inhuman" (ibid. 169). In a sense he is inhuman, because he bears a resemblance - a physical one - to the ancient statues and to those whom they show. He becomes - or rather strives to become - an embodiment of perfection, a hero, a superman, a god. And assuming a role of a god he is also a creator.

Or rather a re-creator, as he changes the reality surrounding him according to already given models, turning people into objects, into the elements of the patterns he creates. No personal, human factor is allowed to mar the design - as when he proposes to Lady Joan:

"I will be the greatest man in the world if I can; and I think I can. Therefore something that is higher than love itself, Fate and what is fitting, make it right that I should wed the most beautiful woman in the world." (Ibid. 296)

Not love, but "Fate and what is fitting" - that is the principle on which marriage bonds are to be based. And - presumably - any human (or rather inhuman) relations.

No wonder that Ivywood prefers Oriental art, with the special interpretation that is imposed on it. It is an abstract, non-figurative and obviously impersonal art. The scene in the turret chamber, and the conversation between Joan and Ivywood, show that this kind of art becomes a *substitute* for the real world. There is a hardly acknowledged misunderstanding - when Joan is enraptured with the beauty of the landscape outside, Ivywood, in reply to her delight, comments upon the adornments inside; however he talks about them as if *they* were the true reality:

"Don't you feel that is the real beauty of all the eastern art; that it is coloured like the edges of things; like the little clouds of morning and the islands of the blest? [...] This art [...] does indeed take the wings of the morning and abide in the uttermost parts of the sea." (Ibid. 109)

Ivywood not only defies the idea of being an "alive" person of flesh and blood and emotions, he also attempts to eliminate tangible reality, or rather to deny its importance. He builds an artificial world, not only with his speeches which evidently cut reality to the needs of some abstract ideology, but also with his artistic preferences. He closes space around himself, exchanging the real sky, stars and the moon for the patterns on the Oriental tapestries, ignoring the view from the turret chamber but submerging himself in the pseudoreality of the patterns, colours and arabesques on the walls and the ceiling of that room. He builds walls and seals entrances - as he does with the back stairs in the Oriental wing. He calls a room in his house "the end of the world" - which may mean a point in space, and is certainly referred to as a point in time, but which may also suggest a state when the outside world - extant or not - is inessential. No wonder that Lady Joan, when

she starts to suffer from “psychic claustrophobia”, recognizes subconsciously the reason for her state - the artificial world into which her reality is changing:

The crumpled violet clouds around the edge of the silver evening looked to Lady Joan more and more like vivid violet embroideries hemming some silver curtain in the closed corridor at Ivywood. (Ibid. 29)

Thus the effect of this kind of art is isolation, almost imprisonment (thought not necessarily a physical one). The patterns of art become *the* reality - and not only for one who expects it and wants it, but also for the unwilling intruders such as Lady Joan and Patrick Dalroy. Both of them undergo the experience of being isolated from the real world - however, while they are brought back by their fellow-intruders (a dog, the beloved woman), Lord Ivywood remains in the world of “that hard fatalistic freedom of the heroes (or should we say villains) in *The Arabian Nights*” (ibid. 135). In the world “created” and inhabited by Ivywood the borderline between art and reality is lost - and in effect one turns into the other, making man a prisoner of his own creation.

If we talk about imprisonment or isolation, we must not forget another aspect of it. Rejecting the idea of the “artificiality of art” - and thus its autonomy - results in depriving it of its function as a means of communication and interpersonal contact. It seems important that Lord Ivywood bans inns and inn-signs - and the motif of an inn-sign (or just a sign) is so prominent in the novel. The word “sign” acquires a double meaning here - that of a board in front of an inn and that of a sign as an element of communication.

And indeed, the art favoured by Ivywood stops to mean anything, to communicate any consistent personal message. True, Ivywood claims that it is easy to “read” Oriental art: “They say it contains no form of life; but surely we can read its alphabet as easily as the red hieroglyphics of sunrise and sunset, which are on the fringes of the robe of God” (ibid. 109-110).

However, these “hieroglyphics” (apart from being elements of nature) are not signs that can be patterned into a personal utterance - they are attributes endowing a place or an object with additional

significance: the "robe" is "the robe of God" because it has "the hieroglyphics", the holy signs, in it. It is obvious that Ivywood's interpretation of Oriental art denies its function as a means of interpersonal communication. The same refers to futurist paintings, which express nothing, except - to quote Ivywood again - "the breaking of the barriers" (ibid. 245).

It seems that the kind of art Ivywood gets involved in assumes participation without communication, thus betraying the traditional function of art. No wonder that imposing non-semantic patterns on reality results in nullifying or - one might say - deconstructing the universe.

There are only illusions of communication - with Ivywood's imposing some significance on the abstract patterns of Eastern art, or with painters' endowing their pictures with titles referring to outward reality. The artistic productions have their more jocular analogy in the novel: the verbal productions of Mr Hibbs, whose perverse use of language deprives it of any communicative value and results in the creation of a verbal (journalistic) version of abstract art. No wonder that these pseudo-utterances have a maddening effect on observers: Hibbs' unfortunate readers want "to get mad or to shoot somebody" (ibid. 92), whereas the collier on the sight of the futurist paintings admits that "somehow or other [...] a' mun be droonk after all" (ibid. 248).

But there is another, more sinister aspect of Lord Ivywood's world. Oriental art is alleged - to quote Ivywood again - not to contain "any form of life" (ibid. 109); and indeed there is no life in such art, as there is no life in Ivywood, when he is called "inhuman" by Dalroy or a "marble statue" by the narrator himself. Not only is his contact with outward reality marred - but so is also his contact with other people. He evidently rarely talks to the others - he makes speeches, which, elegant as they are, have nothing to do with interpersonal contact. He is not subject to emotions or feelings; he is really inhuman when, in his excellence, he never reacts to the insults of the furious Wimpole, when he does not notice the loving and devoted Enid, or when he proposes to Lady Joan on the basis of some abstract rules. He is worshipped as a

hero, but this worship still deprives him of real contact with others - he remains the "marble statue".

Paradoxically, breaking the barriers also means putting them up, experiencing the oxymoronic "fatalistic freedom", and losing all contact with reality and other people - as Ivywood does when he finally becomes a Superman, reaching the realms where "no man has walked before" (ibid. 310) and unable to return, a solipsistic god denying reality and lost in his own creation.

### III

The aspirations of Lord Ivywood expressed at the futurist exhibition and by the futurist paintings themselves find their opposition in the commonsensical remarks of the collier. And indeed what is opposed to the refined, bold and yet destructive ambitions of the Superman-to-be, is common sense, the direct experience of the world, taking things as they are and not as they are made to be by some abstract system or model<sup>2</sup>.

---

2

This is a theme common to other Chesterton's tales, commenting upon the value of the immediate experience of reality, the superiority of observation and contact with the surrounding world over second-hand knowledge and stereotypes. Such is the sense of the ordeal of Gabriel Syme and the other pseudo-anarchists in *The Man Who Was Thursday* - which allows them to gain experience, and not theoretical knowledge, about the responsibility, loneliness and defiance of a man defending the values he believes in. The ability to observe all the details enables Father Brown to grasp the true version of events. It is the acceptance of every person's uniqueness and of the sense of unsafety resulting from such uniqueness that makes Mary (in *Manalive*) say: "There aren't any men. There are no such people. There's a man; and whoever he is he's quite different" (190).

The opposition is obvious already at the outset of Dalroy's and Pump's exploits as the "flying inn-keepers" - when Ivywood's attitude is counterparted with the practical knowledge of Mr Pump:

Lord Ivywood was in error [...] when he said that the fugitives could not possibly escape in modern England. You can do a great many things in modern England if you have noticed some things in fact which others know by pictures or current speech [...]. (Ibid. 48)

And - as the narrator comments upon Ivywood's notions as to the fugitive's chances:

[...] it is very unwise in one who counts himself superior to physical things to talk about physical impossibility. (Ibid. 48)

The ability to see things and take them as they are is also ascribed to Lady Joan Brett, who seems to live on the border of Lord Ivywood's dreams and the real world of Patrick Dalroy, but who never loses the ability to appreciate the tangible reality around her, instead of perceiving it in terms of abstract systems imposed on it.

For her the sunrise was still the rising of a sun and not the turning on of a light by a convenient cosmic servant. To her Spring was really the Season in the country and not merely the Season in town. For her the cocks and hens were natural appendages to an English house, and not (as Lord Ivywood has proved to her from an encyclopaedia) animals of Indian origin, recently imported by Alexander the Great. And so for her a dog was a dog and not one of the higher animals, nor one of the lower animals, nor something that ought to be muzzled, or something that ought not to be vivisected. (Ibid. 104)

And indeed, it is the dog Quaddles - a stranger from the real world in the colourful Oriental wing - that brings her back to the reality, and her common sense saves her from getting lost in Ivywood's artificial paradise.

But it is not Joan Brett or Humphrey Pump or even the "repentant" Dorian Wimpole who are really contrasted to Lord Ivywood and his attitude towards reality. The character who is Ivywood's real adversary

and who in fact is the only person who can - and does - threaten the lord's plans and dreams is the red-headed Irish adventurer and poet, Patrick Dalroy. And - it seems - it is important that he is not only an adventurer, but also a poet, that he not only defies the inn-banning law, but also makes poems and songs (and makes others produce them, too) which are evidently opposed - as a kind of art - to the abstract paintings and adornments so cherished by Ivywood.

As I have already mentioned, "the breaking of the barriers" in abstract painting - or, as Lady Joan puts it, the breaking of everything - denies any possibility of interpersonal contact through art. The paintings are not presented in the novel as the expression of somebody's vision of the world but rather as an experiment in acquiring and transgressing the limits of creation, with no addressee at all. It is never so in the case of Dalroy's songs - in fact they are directed at contact, at communication.

Poetry becomes here a way of expressing oneself - a personal utterance may be humorous, spiteful (as Pump's poem against grocers) or rebellious (as quite a few of Dalroy's songs). It is a way of experiencing reality - or rather a way of putting one's experience into words and transmitting it to the others<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> No wonder that the narrator comments with irony and humorous distance upon Dorian Wimpole's "masterpieces" with their absurd notions of making a camel address his mate in terms of love poetry conventions, or rats talk like the revolutionary masses (although instead of building barricades the creatures are advised to "fix [their] teeth in floor and door" - 158). After all these poems are revealed to be pure intellectual constructs born from the car-ride-provoked inspiration, and the poet, who, in spite of his declarations "that there was no earthly creature that a poet should forget" (158), forgets at least one "earthly creature" - his own driver - only to discover the existence of the man indirectly, when the driver takes the car away leaving Wimpole in the woods in the rather allegorical company of the donkey. Dorian's experience is similar here to that of his many Chestertonian "brothers", such as Professor Openshaw in *The Blast of the Book*, or John Braintree in *The Return of Don Quixote*, who are forced to confront their models with the real world. The "seven moods of Dorian" are not exactly the moods of a poet who gets lost in the artificial reality of his poems (or his inspirations),

One cannot help noticing that the abundance of songs and poems is not sufficiently motivated by the course of action - any pretext is good to produce them. Or rather, the poetic texts are motivated by the conventional plot referring back to the picaresque tradition (of the Dickensian type): what characterizes Dalroy's world is open space (opposed to Ivywood's closed rooms), variety of landscapes, people and communities. Both the plot itself and the way the setting is described reveal an open, free, varied and changeable world - as multifarious as the songs and poems themselves. And it is a colourful world, too, although its colours are different from those of Ivywood's artificial world. Whereas the multicoloured Oriental patterns are evidently fixed once and forever, the elements of the outward reality assume various tinges and shades. Thus Patrick's hair may be simply red or it may be scarlet, the sea is once "pale elfin green", "marble blue", "azure" or "leaden", the evening sky is "rose-red", "purple" or of a "delicate ruby" colour. Thus also the way the outward reality (Dalroy's world) is described makes it alive in comparison with its imitations created by Ivywood.

It is essential that Ivywood's artistic reality is an imitation which, as I have already mentioned, aspires to be *the* reality. Contrary to this, most of Dalroy's poetry is overtly fictitious. He announces a song about this or that, but the central situation is usually a product of his imagination. It is doubtful whether St George - even in the Chestertonian world of *The Flying Inn* - indulged in wine and ale, or whether Patrick really offered his pork to "a Doctor Gluck", whose nose "had a hook", or whether Noah actually fed on whales and ostrich eggs. Any truth-to-fact is denied in the sequence of poems explaining why the road curves - and Pump's poem, the only one which tells the truth, is rejected by his friends. Fictitious or not, the poems are never taken for reality (as the art supported by Ivywood is), although they

---

but the moods of a person who may be furious, enchanted, hilarious or just enjoying himself, but who never loses contact with the world that is there.

obviously transform reality by the simple fact that they become part of it. No wonder that Dalroy calls for “a riding song”, “a hunting song”, “a fighting song” and “a drinking song”: all these assume a common activity of which the song is an aspect, and - as it seems - quite an important one.

And the jocularly and humour of most of these songs fits the seemingly flippant and non-serious speeches and the clownish exploits of Dalroy. For all his opposing Ivywood he does not fight him with a sword<sup>4</sup> but he ridicules his efforts, reducing them to the absurd. Both Patrick's songs and his deeds reverse the - seriously taken - order of things which results from assuming a set of conventions and imposed rules, but at the same time they restore the most obvious values and principles. Dalroy is a revolutionary, as he introduces chaos into the thoroughly ordered world of Ivywood, but his activities reveal the true (one might say “natural”) order of things - and natural, interpersonal contact and relations.

The notion of poetry, as the “common place”, as a means of establishing contact between people, is related in Chesterton's novel to the motif of the inn. After all Dalroy calls for a “drinking song”, too, and the two adventurers (Pump and Patrick) are at the same time inn-keepers, even if they keep only a “*flying* inn”. And here we return to the inn-sign.

I have proposed to define the “signs” of Ivywood's Oriental art as attributes that point to the status of a place rather than ones that are used as part of an utterance. They - as the abstract paintings - mark (or stand for) the realms that Lord Ivywood strives to enter, for the breaking of the barriers. But these “hieroglyphics” are similar in their function to the inn-sign - they all invite a person “inside”, they mark an

---

4

Here his real opponent is Oman Pasha. Perhaps it would be interesting to follow the implications of the fact that the colour green is both the national colour of Ireland and of the Muslim countries - which is recalled in the novel for example by the name of the inn “The Green Man”.

entrance. In the case of Ivywood, the adornments in the "end of the world", the "fringe of the robe of God" open on realms which are not for man to tread - and indeed when Ivywood, like the ancient Babel master-builders, penetrates the forbidden regions, he ends as badly as his predecessors.

The inn-sign, on the other hand, like the poetry of Dalroy and his friends, marks an entrance into the company of men, personal contact and communication, common joy - none of these neglecting or denying the reality "outside".

#### IV

So there are two protagonists of *The Flying Inn*, two kinds of art, two ways of life opposed to each other - the contrast being between the joy of life, the company of men (and women), love and sympathy (but also other emotions), spontaneity and friendship, on the one hand, and on the other, abstract patterns imposed on human behaviour and expression, lack of contact, impersonality, isolation, hubris and finally madness. And, of course, there can be no doubt which vision of the world Chesterton identifies himself with.

But, as I have already mentioned, *The Flying Inn* is a novel about creation - and in the case of both protagonists one might speak about an act of creating some reality; but whereas Ivywood's activities result less in creation and more in mutilating reality, turning it into an abstract pattern, Patrick's songs are autonomous in relation to the outward world (in the sense that there is an evident boundary between the poem and the world beyond it), so they may only enrich the reality they become part of.

Dalroy's poems have risen in status by being included in Chesterton's collection *Wine, Water and Song*. Therefore one might ask about the affinities between Chesterton's literary output and the poetic texts which he ascribes to Patrick Dalroy and his friends - especially those affinities which do not exist only on the thematic level (that would be obvious in the case of poems) but also on the level of

the assumed communicative situation: the way that Chesterton establishes contact with his readers. So the question is in what way he himself fulfils the function of artistic creation which he ascribes to his protagonists' productions.

First of all, no matter how much might have been written on the Christian and moral aspects of Chesterton's literary output, he offers the reader of his fiction no *ex cathedra* system of norms. His vision of the world is always individual in the sense that it is *ascribed* to an individual - Father Brown, Patrick Dalroy, Monkey Murrel, Innocent Smith - and presented rather by the course of action, implied views, understatements or contrasts, but not as the narrator's generalizations and morals. The values are more to be experienced and abstracted by the reader himself than to be learned from the narrator's discourse - no matter how much we stress the didactic aspect. So the reader has to reconstruct the ethical system of Chesterton's tales - thus becoming an active participant in the process of communication.

Thus, Chesterton involves his reader in the reality he creates by making him look at it through a character's eyes, assume a character's perspective. This perspective is not always the point of view of the protagonist. It happens very often that the reader is forced to make the same mistake as the characters do. It is enough to look at "The Broken Sword" from the Father Brown series, where the subsequent explanations of the puzzling event from the national hero's life are provided by Flambeau - and although none of them is true, each is persuasive enough to be temporarily accepted by the reader.

Moreover, Chesterton makes contact with his readers by using the well-known conventions of popular fiction that are easily recognized. So we find in his tales elements of the poetics of crime fiction, the sensational novel, the picaresque novel and the like, however enriched with "metaphysical dimension", so that the convention-determined type of action serves to reveal a higher order of the world.

And - like Patrick Dalroy - Chesterton draws a clear line between extratextual reality and the world of his novels. There can be no doubts that the events and the people he writes about are not "the events and the people next door" (as the characters of mimetic novels frequently are), and the fictional world is not an attempt at copying an

extant reality. Even if the readers are provoked to identify themselves with the characters, they are also invited to “read” the fictional universe, to recognize it as an aspect of a literary work of art<sup>5</sup> - the latter interpreting and re-interpreting, and not imitating, the reader’s world.

These are only some examples of Chesterton’s efforts to “create” a community between the creator and the addressees with his novels (and obviously with his poems, too) - just as Dalroy does with *his* songs and poems.

Such a relationship obviously additionally ascribes value to Patrick Dalroy’s style of life and rejects Lord Ivywood’s efforts. The problem, however, with these characters is that both of them are presented as sincere (Ivywood is evidently opposed to the cynical Misysra Ammon and Mr Hibbs). The same is true of their attitude towards art - and the art which they choose. For any art is the object of personal experience - and it depends on the kind of art (and perhaps on the observer, too) whether one experiences another person’s efforts to order the world and to propose a personal version of it as the unique vision of reality which can be recorded in an artistic utterance; or whether one experiences chaos and nonsense which result from striving for the impossible, from the search for new modes of expression (where there is nothing to express), from the artist’s desire to reach and transgress the limits of creation.

And here we are back at the end of the twentieth century.

In the modern world, Chesterton’s literary texts might really seem old-fashioned. After all we have experienced various efforts to “break the barriers” in art (and not only in art). Post-modernist writers, abandoning any hope of reaching the truth about the world (and thus

---

5

One of the aspects of such “artificiality” of Chesterton’s world is discussed by Ines Sobanski in this volume. The fact that the characters are given telling names, or that their names refer to specific attributes of the person provokes the reader to interpret the fictional reality rather as a meaningful pattern than as an attempt at imitating the extratextual world.

any possibility of interpreting reality), even denying the existence of any order underlying the universe, or any constant system of values, have indeed reached the limits of creation. Artistic utterances cease to express one's understanding of the universe, that unique truth of the unique person cogitating and experiencing the world; and as a result they cease to communicate anything. Rather, they testify to the disease of our times - the disease of relativity<sup>6</sup>. And this attitude predominates not only in literature and art. In our times the modes of viewing the world imposed on us by political means, by intellectual fashions, or by artistic trends may sometimes even have the flavour of something new and fresh, but they rarely assume the existence of any external frame of reference. Truth becomes inessential: we tend to "suspend" reality, starting to live in artificial systems of our own production, be it a political system, a school of literary criticism or a philosophical model, replacing the real world. We seem to be in the position of the characters in Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* where reality depends on interpretation and not *vice versa*.

And maybe there is nothing *new* in what Chesterton the writer has to say to the modern world - nothing new in the sense of the assumed aims of the post-modernist world. But, foreshadowing the dominant tendencies of our times, he can evidently remind us of old truths - as indeed he recalls them to the readers of his works - "old" not

---

6

One might say that *The Flying Inn* is rather against totalitarian regimes than against relativity. However, the mechanism beyond these two attitudes is similar: in each case any external system of values is denied. The rules which are assumed are arbitrary, and a person becomes the only "law-giver" either to everybody else or just to himself. What Chesterton proposes is that there *are* values worth defending, worth fighting for, or even worth dying for, but the acceptance of these values does not justify imposing them on anyone by force or by law. It seems important that Ivywood is left alive: no more capable of endangering other people he is left to his dreams. It is also important that Dalroy the adventurer is always a defendant of others' freedom and never an aggressor.

necessarily meaning “old-fashioned”. Obviously Chesterton is for the later generations “the voice from the past”. However, this is by no means a derogative phrase. Perhaps our epoch has taught us to neglect such phenomena as tradition and continuity of ideas, but it is obviously not true that the *past* has nothing to tell us, or that in order to appreciate a great writer we have first to define him as “our contemporary”, ascribing to him our values and our understanding of the world.

One might say that Chesterton is one of those writers who could help us to reinterpret the world and to bring back the order of the universe and the original function of art and literature, which is establishing the contact between the creator and his addressee and not making abstract, meaningless patterns. *The Flying Inn* of Chesterton and Dalroy appears to be flying not only in space but also in time.

## Works Cited

- Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. *The Flying Inn*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1914.
- *Manalive*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1947.
- Federman, Raymond. *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975.
- Finkielkraut, Alain. *La défaite de la pensée*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1987.
- Miller, John Hillis. "The Fiction of Realism: Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist, and Cruikshank's Illustrations". *Dickens Centennial Essays*. Eds. A. Nisbet and B. Nevius. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *Bunt mas (Rebellion de las masas)*. Tr. P. Niklewicz. Warszawa: Muza SA, 1995.
- Steiner, George. *In Bluebeard's Castle. Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.
- Sukenick, Ronald. *The Life of Fiction*. Ed. J. Klinkowitz. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

## Zusammenfassung

### CHESTERTON UND DER PERSÖNLICHE KONTAKT: KUNST VERSUS KUNST IN *THE FLYING INN*

Die Moderne ist geprägt durch Werterelativismus und durch die Problematisierung des Wirklichkeitsbegriffs und, daraus resultierend, der Kommunikation. Chesterton widersetzt sich diesen Tendenzen: in den Father Brown-Geschichten z. B. wird die Welt als prinzipiell durchschau- und bewertbar dargestellt.

Die Analyse von *The Flying Inn* konzentriert sich auf den spezifischen Umgang einzelner Figuren mit der Realität. Lord Ivywood, der sich seine eigene, solipsistische Kunst-Welt aufgebaut hat, werden Vertreter des *common sense* wie Pump oder Joan Brett gegenübergestellt, vor allem aber der Dichter und Abenteurer Patrick Dalroy, dessen Dichtung paradoxerweise gerade wegen ihrer Fiktionalität den Blick für die essentielle Wirklichkeit öffnet. Während Lord Ivywood Starrheit, Abstraktion und Isolation verkörpert, steht Dalroy für Gemeinschaftssinn, Spontaneität und Lebensfreude. Obgleich Chesterton sich jeglichen wertenden Kommentars enthält und jedem seiner Charaktere einen aufrichtigen Glauben an die jeweils verkörperten Werte zubilligt, ist es doch klar, wo seine Sympathien liegen. Seine Haltung mag 'altmodisch' sein, doch vermag sie dem Leser zu helfen, im Licht von klaren Ordnungsprinzipien die Welt aufs neue zu interpretieren.