

G.K. Chesterton

— *This excerpt has been taken from the book Cultural Amnesia by Clive James (W.W. Norton, 2007).*

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) published so many books that his posthumous reputation is almost impossible to sort out. He would have been famous just for his Father Brown stories. He would have been famous just for his novels *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*. He would have been famous just as a literary critic: his monographs on Browning and Dickens are still required reading for serious students of those authors. Above all, he would have been famous just for his journalism: the thing he is least well-known for now. The essays he contributed to periodicals were at the heart of his talent for subversive observation. His vice was wilful paradox, but his virtue was for asking the awkward questions about current liberal fashions. The virtue itself had a drawback: as a Catholic convert, he valued theological tradition to the point of embracing some of its blemishes, one of which was an abiding suspicion of the cosmopolitan. Anti-Semitism reared its head, although not as blatantly as in the work of his contemporary Hilaire Belloc. But generally Chesterton's collections of essays and casual pieces are well worth seeking out in second-hand bookshops. There are a thousand brilliant sentences to prove that he was the natural opponent of state power in any form, so there can be no real doubt about the stance he would have taken had he lived longer. He defined true democracy as the sum total of civilised traditions. It was a conservative approach, but it could never have become a fascist one, since the idea of a civilised tradition was exactly what Fascism set out to dismantle.

To set a measure to praise and blame, and to support
the classics against the fashions.

—G. K. Chesterton

When I copied this sentence into a workbook about twenty years ago, foolishly I neglected to note the provenance. The sentence does not appear in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* but

that, alas, is no surprise: its entry on Chesterton consists almost entirely of scraps torn from his poetry, whereas all of his best remarks were in his prose, which the editors of the Oxford book obviously did not get around to reading. It is hard to blame them for that, because catching up with Chesterton's prose is the work of a lifetime. He wrote a lot faster than most of us can read. Chesterton published many, many, books, and at one time I was trying to collect them all. (My shelves containing Chesterton still outdistance my shelves containing Edmund Wilson, but with Wilson I know my way around almost to the inch, whereas there are cubic feet of Chesterton's output where I can't find my way back to something I noticed earlier: a slipshod disorientation, which I could have avoided by taking proper notes.) I saw myself as his champion. Other journalists feared him because he was so productive. Mainstream writers feared him because he wrote too well. He was favourite kind of writer, scaring everybody because he had talent to burn, and no sense of calculation to make his talent decisive.

His critical writings struck me as particularly valuable among his output: rather more valuable, in fact, than the nominally creative work, in which *The Man Who Was Thursday* was widely proclaimed to be his masterpiece by people who had no intention of finding out what else he wrote. I thought *The Man Who Was Thursday* dreadfully windy and most of the poetry less thrilling than its own craft. Is "The White Knight" really that good, even on the level of a *recitativo* party piece? In Sydney in the late fifties I knew at least one Catholic poet who thought "The White Knight" a deathless text, but he (my friend, not Chesterton) was very Catholic, and no great reciter himself. In my experience, fuelled by many a shouted evening among young men educated by Jesuits, the awkward truth became apparent early: Chesterton the Catholic poet was outstripped even by Belloc, and both were left for dead by Hopkins. But it was just as apparent that some of Chesterton's criticism was excellent. Dickens and Browning are not the only names he can bring alive in a short monograph. As an enthusiast for Chaucer he is only just less inspiring than Aldous Huxley, and he had a gift for the critical essay that could survive even his mania for paradox. Somewhere among the paradoxes there was always a considerable plain statement, and the statement quoted above is a prime example.

On the whole, Chesterton's paradoxes merely asked for trouble. His seemingly plain statements were real trouble. I think I knew that at the time, or I would not have written this one down. If I had taken it straight, I would have regarded it as a truism, and left it unremarked. But there was something unsettling about it. Pretending to just lie there inert, it glowed, fizzed, and shovelled piquant smoke, as a lot of Chesterton does. With a new century crowding in on London's journalistic world, I can recommend Chesterton's teetering example to Grub Street hacks on their last legs, facing oblivion in the current equivalent of the Cheshire Cheese, going home to a mansard room full of unmarked files, yellowing tear-sheets and-impossibly dated now, fading to nothing in ordinary daylight—the carbon copies that were once called blacks. *Nil desperandum*. We just might live. After all, did Chesterton ever look at an article and think: this is the one? No, he never knew.

The second part of the sentence is the more immediately awkward part. The first part apparently takes care of itself. Critics who overdo either the praise or the blame are soon rumbled: sooner still if they overdo both. But the apparently unexceptionable exhortation to support the classics against the fashions conceals a genuine dilemma. All the classics were fashions once; new classics have to come from somewhere, and might be disguised as fashions when they do. The neatest deduction that can be made from the advice is about the advisability of finding out what makes something classical, whether it is new or old: and of supporting that, presumably by praise, while blaming anything that pretends to the same condition without the proper qualifications. So the two parts of the motto connect at that point. They connect more closely when we consider that a classic might be tainted by fashionable components, or that a fashion might be enriched by classical ones. Such a possibility is not likely to arise with accepted classics from the past: unless, paradoxically, we find out too much about them. Suppose we knew everything about popular entertainment at the time of Ovid: it might turn out that tall stories about metamorphosis were a craze at fashionable dinner tables, the hot topic at the saturnalia. Or suppose we knew everything about theology at the time of Dante (some scholars almost do): it might turn out that some of Dante's points of doctrine were the merest run-of-the-cloisters debating points. Benedetto Croce, indeed, working

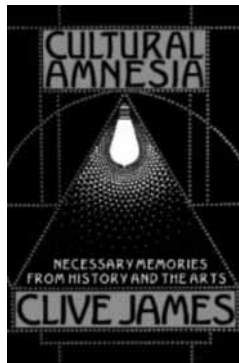
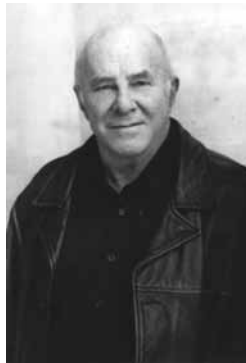
like that very basic Australian device the milk separator (it left the cream on top of the milk, like a golden duvet on a heap of sheets), divided the *The Divine Comedy* rigorously between *poesia* and *letteratura*, and by *letteratura* Croce meant the stuff that belonged to its time—a concept which sounds more like fashion than like anything else. Still, most of us never get to know that much. Knowing about the background is what we either don't get to do or else forget about in short order, and for us, the common readers—who are, in modern times, the uncommon people still interested even though the examinations are no longer compulsory—every ancient classic remains classical right through, even when impenetrable. Homer's most vivid translator in recent times, Christopher Logue, knows that the Homeric poems are classics, even though he can't read them in the original. That's why he feels compelled to bring all his talent to the task of finding an English equivalent for them, with results that might very well prove classic in their turn.

But with contemporary classics we are involved with the same dichotomy from the jump. It is hard to think of a creative mind so pure that it would not be affected by popular notions to some extent. Also it is hard to think of any modern classic in any field that has not been affected by the popular arts. Some modern classics began as popular arts, and in very recent times an assumption has grown up—not easily to be laughed off—that there is no better way for a modern classic to begin. Certainly, in the English-speaking countries, a modern classic song is more likely to come out of a centre for a popular genre—Tin Pan Alley, say, or Broadway, of the Brill Building, or Nashville—than out of the “art song” tradition. In France, the “art song” tradition has some important classical composers at the foundation of it (Fauré, Reynaldo Hahn, Duparc, etc.) and carries prestige as a consequence; but one of the reasons the *chanson* heritage is relatively strong is that the popular genres have always been relatively weak; and anyway, Prevert, Brel, Brassens and a dozen other names are scarcely thought of as members of an academy. In literature, a writer as good as W. G. Sebald is safe from selling millions of books, but he would not be disqualified from seriousness if he sold hundreds of thousands, which he is nowadays quite likely to do, given time. No theorist about literature could any longer get away with the proposition that best-sellerdom

is an automatic disqualification from quality. Louis de Berniere's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* might not be quite the masterpiece it was thought to be by many of those who chose it for their one hard read of the year, but it is not inconsiderable either: millions of man-hours on the holiday beaches were well enough spent in reading it, although the heart quails at the thought that those same readers later fell for the unalleviated stupidity of *The Da Vinci Code*. In Germany, the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki's uncompromisingly taxing autobiography *Mein Leben* was at the top of the best-seller list for most of the millennium year. No doubt there was a fashionable element in its reception—some of the people who bought it to decorate the hall table might have been establishing their tolerance, refurbishing credentials *vis-à-vis* the cloudy past, etc.—but there was no fashionable element to the book itself, a literary work of the first order. Chesterton was actually alive when his principle was used against Puccini, and if Chesterton had been active as a music critic he might well have used it himself. Apart from Shaw, most of the writers on opera at the turn of the century loftily regarded the Italian operatic heritage as a branch of popular music. (“The music’s only Verdi but the melody is sweet.”) Puccini’s overwhelming popular success was interpreted as a fashion by his detractors. Until very recently it still was. When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, a prominent Wagnerian among the dons tried to tell me several times that Wagner’s stature as a classic confirmed Puccini’s as a fashion.

The same don has since turned into one of our best, most receptive and conscientious opera critics, but he didn’t do it by following up on Chesterton’s principle, which turns out, for its second half, not to be a principle at all. Either in life or in the mind, there can be no such rigid division of the classical and the fashionable. A work of art has to be judged by its interior vitality, not by its agreed prestige. Prestige alone was never enough to keep an acknowledged classic alive: if it had been, Petrarch’s long poems in Latin, which he thought were his real claims to fame, would still be read today. The response to vitality brings us back to the first part, and reveals it, at last, to be an even bigger conundrum than the second. Without a capacity for blaming the sterile, there can be no capacity for praising the vital. Those without a gift for criticism can’t be appreciative beyond a certain point, and the point is set quite low, in the basement

of enjoyment. (Being mad about Mantovani is *not* a good qualification for the appreciator of Beethoven: Albert Einstein, who in his role as a dinner-party guru enjoyed introducing ignoramuses to classical music, would use Mantovani as bait, but he never thought the bait was a living fish.) On the other hand, those who are too critical are apt to run out of appreciation at the crucial time. Stravinsky, who was never comfortable about attention paid to other composers even if they were long dead, took most of his adult life to get around to the appreciation of Beethoven's late quartets, and gave the impression that his own life had to be almost over before he could hear what Beethoven was trying to do at the end of his. (It was also Stravinsky, however, who finally and incontrovertibly gave Tchaikovsky the praise that was due to him, and thus rescued him from a hundred years of being denigrated as Easy Listening.) All we can be certain of is that such oscillations between praise and blame, whatever their amplitude, show no discontinuity. Praise and blame are aspects of the same thing. The capacity for criticism is the capacity for enjoyment. They don't have to be kept in touch with each other. They are a single propensity that has to keep in touch with itself. Chesterton's plain statement is like one of his paradoxes without the simplicity: but that's a paradox in itself. It's an area that the dear, bibulous, chortling old boy gets you into. He invited being patronised, but it was a stratagem. He was serious, always. He just didn't seem to be.



Clive James author of *Cultural Amnesia*