

# THE GROTESQUE AS A LITERARY STRATEGY FOR EXPRESSING THE INEXPRESSIBLE

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***Abstract:** Literary grotesque is presented as a powerful rhetorical strategy to communicate a range of existential experience difficult to express through conventional verbal means. The discussion concentrates on G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, demonstrating how the framing of the narrative in the grotesque mode serves an epistemological quest.*

***Keywords:** G.K. Chesterton, grotesque, literary strategy, narrative fiction*

## 1. Introduction

The following discussion proposes to bring together visual and literary art, and take under scrutiny their convergence in the concept of the grotesque, which is viewed both as a powerful strategy to generate meaning, and a particularly effective vehicle to represent the inexpressible. It seems that literary grotesque accomplishes with words comparable effects to what painted images or sculpted forms achieve through the same convention in visual arts. On the verbal plane it provokes and calls for the same response from the reader as the grotesque in painting, sculpture and architecture produces and requires from the viewer on the sensual level. What is more, although the very form and idea of the grotesque originate in the realm of images, it is in the realm of words that it reaches the highest peak of its possibilities and produces most spectacular effects. In literature the grotesque combines word and image in a unique way as it allows a curious intertwining of the intellectual and imaginative components to the effect that the resulting aesthetic experience acquires an unusual intensity.

The grotesque as a rhetorical strategy is widely used in all forms of literary art, but it seems to be an especially potent device when it gets incorporated into the discourse of fiction and, consequently, when it is allowed to evolve within the structural framework of the novel.

The ensuing analysis concentrates on G.K. Chesterton and his imaginative writing as exemplified in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1981/1908). It will demonstrate how the novel uses all the techniques characteristic of the mode of grotesque, especially deformations and incongruities, to communicate a range of existential experience difficult to accommodate within the ordinary conventions of traditional narrative.

Before proceeding to the specific analysis and detailed discussion of the grotesque used in Chesterton's fiction, it is appropriate to take a brief look at the source and nature of the concept of the grotesque, identified in a concise dictionary definition as a mode "characterised by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features [and in literature] involves

freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behaviour" (Baldick 1990:93). However, it has to be stressed that no definition does complete justice to the complex nature of the grotesque which, "both require[s] and defeat[s] definition" (Harpham 1982:3).

## **2. Figurative hybrid – a bird's-eye view of history and anatomy of the grotesque**

Undoubtedly the origins of the grotesque can be traced back to a visual representation: first and foremost it is understood as an embellishing element in ornamental painting which intermingles human, animal and vegetable themes and forms. In architecture it is linked with decorations known as gargoyles. Its extension to the domain of verbal language takes place much later, probably in consequence of its association with caricature, and it often points to a complex interweaving of incongruous themes and subjects. The appeal of the grotesque is first of all sensual, and only subsequently does it become intellectual. Therefore it is not surprising that the grotesque is deeply rooted in physicality, where it shows a striking affinity with the physically abnormal.

The aesthetic awareness of the grotesque can be located very early in the history of art and civilisation. Wolfgang Kayser, a German critic who laid the foundations for the critical evaluation of the grotesque in modern times, evokes the name and the authority of another German, the art historian Ludwig Curtius, who looks back to the reign of Emperor Augustus, i.e. the very beginning of the first century AD, and quotes a Roman writer, Marcus Vitruvius Polio, who speaks with considerable distaste and disapproval of a new tendency in decorating objects with "monstrous forms [and] half-figures crowned by human and animal heads. Such things [which] never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being" (Kayser 1963:20). The perceptive Roman writer and viewer of the grotesque further asks with an easily detectable note of shock and disgust, typical of the response provoked by the grotesque: "...how can the stem of a flower support a roof...? How can a tender shoot carry a human figure, and how can bastard forms composed of flowers and human bodies grow out of roots and tendrils?" (Kayser 1963:20).

The extravagant decorations described by Marcus Vitruvius came to light around the sixteenth century as the result of excavations carried out in Rome. Around that time the term 'grotesque' comes into being, derived from the Italian word for caves, i.e. *grotte*. Hence come the adjective *grottesco* and the noun *la grottesca*, both initially rather pejorative because denoting the artistic manner which violates the classical order and generally accepted conventions.

Arthur Clayborough, in his illuminating, though highly individual, account of the development of the grotesque, speaks of the prevailing negative attitudes to the grotesque and he stresses its lower status with regard to recognised canons in art which come to the foreground in critical writings in the eighteenth century. The age of Neo-Classicism perceives the grotesque in terms of "extravagance, fantasy,

individual taste, and the rejection of ‘the natural conditions of organisation’.... [it sees it as something] ‘ridiculous, distorted, unnatural’ (adj.); ‘an absurdity, a distortion of nature’ (noun)” (Clayborough 1965:6). In consequence the grotesque gets associated primarily with the ludicrous and playful, and it is often regarded merely as an aspect of the comic.

Later criticism, however, tends to see more serious qualities in the grotesque. Just as Neo-Classicism inevitably leads to its anti-thesis and reaction in the age of Romanticism, so the eighteenth-century grotesque, cast in the frivolous farcical mould, acquires a new and profounder dimension in the nineteenth century, where it starts to be regarded as a vehicle of the monstrous, ominous and horrifying; something that touches the inmost nerve of existence confronted with the frightening Inscrutable.

John Ruskin, an influential writer and also, significantly, a painter, is one of the most distinguished English art critics of the Victorian era, who in a sense rehabilitated the grotesque as a mode of expression, and elevated it to the status of an alternative version of aesthetic categories of beauty and the sublime. In the English critical writings of the nineteenth century it is primarily Ruskin who is responsible for orchestrating a marriage of the aesthetics of the grotesque with metaphysics, which in consequence opens the concept to the notions of awesome and numinous, and so paves the way for the grotesque to address human condition specifically. In the chapter entitled “Grotesque Renaissance” of the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin (2003) makes a significant distinction between two kinds of the grotesque: one is identified as noble and true, the other as ignoble and false. The former type seems to be particularly suited to render man’s imperfect nature and his paradoxical position in the universe. Ruskin’s idea of the true and noble grotesque is in keeping with the views of Friedrich Schlegel, the leading theoretician of German Romantics, in whose philosophical musings on the tragic irony of human plight Kayser discerns the element of the grotesque and identifies it as “the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying” (Kayser 1963:53).

The capacity of the grotesque to incorporate the paradoxical on the one hand and its curious grasp upon the impenetrable metaphysics on the other present a particular interest and attraction for G.K. Chesterton, the enthusiast of the Middle Ages and the great admirer of Gothic cathedrals where the grotesque has left its lasting impression. As will be demonstrated subsequently, Chesterton’s *oeuvre* seems to be an especially fitting example to bring to light all the richness and complexity of the literary grotesque.

### **3. G. K. Chesterton: the visionary inscribing the grotesque into art and life**

G.K. Chesterton has a reputation of the master of paradox and a writer with a sense of wonder. On the literary and cultural scene of the first decades of the twentieth century he appears as an impressive figure of a debater and a poet committed to the service of ideas who believes that it is his public mission to help those whom he sees as crippled with ordinary custom and blinded with everyday

routine to recognise the miraculous nature of existence. It is noteworthy that the writer in Chesterton has a special propensity for adventure stories which the mature thinker extrapolates so as to apply the paradigm of adventure to man's existential situation in the world and in the universe. As a consequence of such attitude life is perceived as a narrative of fascinating adventure.

It has to be remembered that Chesterton is above all a thinker with a natural philosophical slant of mind whose literary output combines imaginative writing with an intellectual debate on crucial issues in man's life. But Chesterton is also a visual artist, with a professional training at London Slade School of Arts, in whose creative output the man of letters merges with a painter, and both fall back upon the strategy of the grotesque to construct the vision of the world that will illuminate some of the riddles posed by reality. The grotesque provides G.K. Chesterton with the best means to tell that story of existential and metaphysical adventure. What is more, it is in the grotesque that all Chesterton's views and ideas converge to find there a perfect fulfilment, and to form his own identifiable *Weltanschauung*.

### **3.1. G.K. Chesterton's fascination with the grotesque**

All Chesterton's imaginative writing is either permeated with the sense of the grotesqueness, or it incorporates entire specific images or fictional characters that can be identified as distinctly grotesque. Likewise much of his criticism and non-fiction prose is dedicated to what amounts to an apology for the grotesque. Chesterton's books *Robert Browning* (1903) and *Charles Dickens* (1906) as well as his essays: "On Gargoyles," "A Defence of Ugly Things," "A Defence of Nonsense" and "A Defence of Skeletons" are just a few examples of his persistent attempts to restore the correct perspective in the aesthetic appraisal and critical assessment of the ugly, apparently incongruous or deviating from the norm and convention that build up the style in art, with which Chesterton feels strong affinity and which is known as the grotesque.

The most important claim which Chesterton makes is that the grotesque is not an aberration of nature or solely a hideous distortion of what complies with the established criteria of harmony and beauty, but that it represents a profound reflection of reality by reaching out to its hidden layers and encoded messages. Thus the grotesque gets its inspiration from the inherent nature of things and it draws its force from the very core of reality. That is why in his discussion of the work of Browning Chesterton puts forward the opinion that grotesque forms in art are justifiable by natural order and legitimate in nature: "Browning's verse, in so far as it is grotesque, is not complex or artificial; it is ragged like the thunder-cloud, it is top-heavy, like the toadstool. Energy which disregards the standard of classical art is in nature as it is in Browning" (Auden 1970:26). Chesterton never ceases to promote and propagate the human beings' deep-seated affinity with what he calls the "ruggedness," which in observable reality contravenes abstract orderliness and conformity to custom.

Ruggedness being an essential quality in the universe, there is that in man which responds to it as to the striking of any other chord of the eternal harmonies. As the children of nature, we are akin not only to the stars and flowers, but also to the toadstools and the monstrous tropical birds. And it is to be repeated as the essential of the question that on this side of our nature we do emphatically love the form of the toadstools, and not merely some complicated and botanical moral lessons which the philosopher may draw from them. (Auden 1970:22)

Chesterton is enthralled and intrigued by the exuberant variety and oddities perceivable in the artistic mode of the grotesque, and he deeply believes that they correspond to the richness and inexhaustible, though sometimes hidden and not fully realised, resources of reality. G.K. Chesterton, the defender of ugly things and skeletons, and the admirer of the art of Dickens and Browning, is fascinated with what he sees as the paradoxical nature of the grotesque: on the one hand, through its bold disregard of the principles of mimesis, it represents an outrageous transgression upon the laws of nature and the rules of decorum, on the other hand, however, it offers the most faithful and complete reflection of reality. And it is so because the grotesque truly imitates what is irregular and irrational, what challenges the sense of order and what unsettles the mind by posing unanswerable questions. For Chesterton the grotesque turns out to be a crucial strategy first to take hold of the diversity of life experience, then to shape it into his own philosophy, and eventually to render it in his imaginative writing. In both his philosophical reflection and artistic vision grotesque forms perfectly comply with what Harpham stresses in his succinct summation: “They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organising the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles” (Harpham 1982:3).

### **3.2. The function of the grotesque**

Chesterton believes that “Energy and joy [are] the father and the mother of the grotesque” (Auden 1970:25), and they are both responsible for its two pivotal functions, i.e. the reawakening of the sense of wonder at the marvellous nature of all creation, and liberating man from various forms of mental and spiritual oppression.

According to Chesterton, the grotesque, which brings together incongruent elements and apparently turns things upside down, compels people to look at the world with the fresh eyes of a child, and discover exquisite beauty in the commonplace and ordinary objects: “To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself” (Auden 1970:26-27). The caricature of man and the world, which the grotesque apparently offers, operates as a magnifying glass that enables the viewer to see the vibrant splendour in the

surrounding world. Thus the topsy-turvy and lop-sided domain of the grotesque becomes a breeding ground for a renewed perception. In consequence it establishes a vantage point for Chestertonian sense of wonder which comprises delight, surprise and gratitude for the marvels of Being. Chesterton elaborates on this function of the grotesque in a great body of his writing, and particularly in his study of Robert Browning, where he introduces the concept of the philosopher of the grotesque and defines his role: “it is the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world stand on its head that people may look at it” (Auden 1970:27).

Furthermore, by interweaving the totally disparate components of the ludicrous and the monstrous, the grotesque achieves the apparently impossible task of combining terror with laughter. Chesterton argues that by doing so it tames all the menacing presences that haunt human life, which as a result gets released from existential trembling in the nets of nihilism and pessimism that blur the vision and paralyse capability. Therefore for Chesterton the grotesque is an important therapeutic mode which art administers to life so as to cure the most insidious ills of the modern man. Aidan Nichols in his study of Chesterton as a theologian refers to the notion of “therapy of perception” (Nichols 2009:113), and it seems most appropriate to apply this term to Chesterton’s views on the function of the grotesque and its role as a weapon against the paralysing routine.

#### **4. Narrative fiction in the grotesque convention – therapy and metaphysical quest**

Therapy of perception certainly applies to G.K. Chesterton’s most puzzling novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). It is noteworthy that the novel was inspired by an autobiographical impulse and written as part of the process of recovery from a serious nervous crisis Chesterton was undergoing in connection with the impact of ideas of solipsism, agnosticism, relativism, nihilism and pessimism, which overpowered and incapacitated his mind and will. Therefore in the light of the autobiographical data the novel’s subtitle, *A Nightmare*, is highly significant. But the significance of the subtitle reaches even further. It may be related to Chesterton’s view of dreams as cryptic grotesque comments on the nature of reality: “In this subconscious world, in short, *existence betrays itself*; it shows it is full of spiritual forces which disguise themselves as lions and lamp-posts, which can as easily disguise themselves as butterflies and Babylonian temples” (Chesterton 1938:82-3). The novel also bears another important authorial impression. While in post-modern critical jargon narratives can be either ‘writerly’ or ‘readerly’, one could venture the statement that *The Man Who Was Thursday* is the most ‘painterly’ among Chesterton’s novels because Chesterton’s training at London Slade School of Art and his experience as an illustrator conspicuously figure out both in its imagery and character portrayal.

On the personal plane the writing of *The Man Who Was Thursday* evidently assisted its author in regaining the mental balance which was seriously

shaken as the result of Chesterton's encounter with what he regards as maladies of modernity. On the artistic level the novel represents a perfect example of the grotesque inscribed into the narrative structure and operative within the boundaries of the world of fiction. *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a quintessentially grotesque novel, which uses the grotesque mode to perform its fundamental task of reaching out into the very heart of Being, where joy and fear lie side by side, and comedy and terror have the same face. In the novel the grotesque face belongs to Sunday who thus resembles a gargoyle enigma on the Gothic cathedral.

#### **4.1. *The Man Who Was Thursday* – a sobering nightmare**

The novel presents the world at the beginning of the 20th century, where nothing is what it seems or pretends to be, and there are no clear and objective points of reference. Instead, chaos and confusion rule everywhere, and they seem to belong intrinsically to the character of life. The portrayed world lives in the shadow of some undefined, but dangerous conspiracy that presents a serious threat to civilisation as its aim is to bring in anarchy and to abolish "all those arbitrary distinctions of vice and virtue, honour and treachery" (Chesterton 1981:23). Already at the beginning of the narrative the main goal of the anarchist conspiracy is presented in very clear terms as the demolition of the foundations of existential order. One of the main exponents of the anarchist ideology spells out their objective most succinctly when he shouts that eventually they mean "to abolish God!" (Chesterton 1981:23).

The plot begins with the encounter of two poets: Lucian Gregory, fully dedicated and zealous poet of anarchy, and Gabriel Syme, the eponymous Thursday, who is a poet of common sense and order. The narrative mostly consists of a chase, running away and a number of surrealist adventures of seven members of the Central Anarchist Council who, for reasons of security and conspiracy, are called by the names of the days of the week. They are all presided by the Chief Anarchist bearing the name of Sunday. Gradually all the anarchists turn out to be disguised detectives under a secret command of the chief police officer, who turns out to be Sunday himself.

#### **4.2. Clash of anarchy and order**

At the centre of the plot of *The Man Who Was Thursday* is the collision between two extremes and at the same time two irreconcilable opposites. At first they are embodied in the figures of the two poets: Gregory – the poet of anarchy, and Syme – the poet of order. It is worthwhile to notice that the principal exponents of what can be seen as ontological and existential incompatibility between anarchy and order, are artists belonging to the domain of literature and poetic sensitivity. Therefore it is valid to assume that they are privileged with a profounder insight and granted special means for its expression. Chesterton fully endorses the

romantic view of poetry in its assertion that the poet, thanks to his poetic ability, can see more and better.

Not surprisingly Chesterton casts Gabriel Syme in the mould of a poet-detective who is called to find out some truth, while being at the same time a sensitive artist contemplating a grotesque design which evolves before his eyes.

Gabriel Syme was not merely a detective who pretended to be a poet; he was really a poet who had become a detective. (Chesterton 1981:41)

In the dialectic between order and anarchy Syme, through the distorting mirror of the grotesque, becomes a revolutionary who “revolted into the only thing left – sanity” (Chesterton 1981:41). Thus, in the plot of the novel, anarchy and order get continually interchanged with madness and sanity, and revolutions are made not to overthrow, but to establish order. Furthermore the revolutionary poet of order has the face of a medieval knight seeking adventure and ready to “cross swords with the enemy of all creation” (118). There is also a prophetic streak in the character of Syme who has been always warning people of the “deluge of barbaric denial” (42) and now unequivocally responds to what another camouflaged detective calls “fight for civilisation” (122).

In his bizarre adventure Gabriel Syme encounters a colourful pageant of other characters, above all other disguised detectives, who have a twofold function in Chesterton’s fictitious world of grotesquery: they are in the service of sanity and order on the one hand, and that of madness and anarchy on the other. In the course of the preposterously odd pursuit the demarcation line separating the pursuers from the pursued becomes more and more apparent. Gradually it dawns upon them that in fact they are all chasing the elusive and enigmatic Sunday. They also begin to realise that their strange mission is not solely related to that singular situation, but concerns the broad canvas of life, their metaphysical status and the overall shape and foundations of civilisation which forms the cultural and social milieu of their existence.

#### **4.3. Reality intensified**

It is one of Chesterton’s strongest beliefs that in order to get a foretaste of the metaphysical, one has got to have a solid hold upon the physical. In the grotesque the visual appeal comes before the verbal, and the bodily tangible is put before the ephemeral and the abstract. It is not surprising therefore that the grotesque is for Chesterton an especially potent channel and a meaningful artistic intermediary for his philosophy.

As a curious mingling of incongruities, the grotesque is closely akin to paradox, and that is why it may “wake men up to a neglected truth” (Chesterton 1981:18), as Syme puts it in his conversation with Gregory. Although the grotesque diverges from the norm and proclaims affinity with the corporally abnormal, it derives its force and effect from being presented within the realistic frame, for it



enhances and intensifies reality. When Syme observes the frolics and freakish behaviour of Professor de Worms, and then juxtaposes it with the man's solid appearance and visible respectability, he cannot help being shaken by "unbearable reality" of the whole scene.

About the Professor's make-up and all his antics there was always something merely grotesque, like a golliwog. Syme remembered those wild woes of yesterday as one remembers being afraid of Bogy in childhood. But here was daylight; here was a healthy square-shouldered man in tweeds, not odd save for the accident of his ugly spectacles, not glaring or grinning at all, but smiling steadily and not saying a word. The whole had a sense of unbearable reality. Under the increasing sunlight the Doctor's complexion, the pattern of his tweeds, grew and expanded outrageously, as such things grow too important in a realistic novel. (Chesterton 1981: 99)

In the artistic treatment through the grotesque reality gets intensified and illuminated so as to reveal, at least fragmentarily, its hidden aspects and deeply buried layers. As the result, reality so compellingly impinges upon sensual perception that the mind is terrified into a shock. Eventually the shock therapy of the grotesque may be beneficial for the recipient because it allows to see the already defamiliarized world in a new light and from a fresh perspective. And such perception, as Chesterton deeply believes, is salutary to man's mental balance and his standing in the world.

When reality gets reinforced in the grotesque, it begins to point out to everything that transcends the material realm and enters the spiritual. In consequence the observable world, with all its ordinary constituents, becomes an ingenious network of symbols and allegories which reflect the metaphysical dimension and elevated status of each commonplace object. It is well illustrated in the scene where the pursuit, which is getting more and more frantic and wild, like a "chaos of chiaroscuro" (Chesterton 1981:126), leads through the forest into an open space. There Syme notices a peasant in the field:

... in the middle of this forest clearing was a figure that might well stand for that common sense in an almost awful actuality. Burnt by the sun and stained with perspiration, and grave with the bottomless gravity of small necessary toils, a heavy French peasant was cutting wood with a hatchet. [...] The man was a Norman, taller than the average of the French and very angular; and his swarthy figure stood dark against a square of sunlight, almost like some allegoric figure of labour frescoed on a ground of gold. (Chesterton 1981:128-9)

The scene shows how Chesterton tries to grasp imaginatively that which is incomprehensible in strictly intellectual categories. He does it through the 'painterly' discourse of the novel which very often draws heavily on the artistic strategies of the grotesque.

#### 4.4. The gallery of grotesque portraits framed in a dance

Syme's nightmarish, but at the same time sobering, adventure involves a whole gallery of portraits where all the anarchists-detectives are like grotesque gargoyles filling with fright and trepidation while simultaneously provoking laughter. Professor de Worms, for example, is depicted as having an "unnatural form [...] recalling that very imaginative figure in the nursery rhymes, 'the crooked man who went the crooked mile'. He really looked as if he had been twisted out of shape..." (Chesterton 1981:78). And the Professor is by no means exceptional in his appearance; on the contrary, he is just an instance of what can be found in all the participants of the ambiguous game of hide-and-seek.

Each man had something about him, [...], which was not normal, and which seemed hardly human. The only metaphor he [Syme] could think of was this, that they all looked as men of fashion and presence would look, with the additional twist given in a false and curved mirror. (Chesterton 1981:58)

Twisting out of the normal, bringing together disparate elements and incompatibilities, deforming and disfiguring are Chesterton's methods of constructing the appearances of the principal characters, where each man, like in the grotesque ornament, "seemed to be, somehow, on the borderline of things" (Chesterton 1981:61).

The most misshapen and self-contradictory is the figure of Sunday who, while talking with his pursuers "made a grimace like a gargoyle" (Chesterton 1981:170), but he is also "like a father playing hide-and-seek with his children" (170). He is huge and fat, but at the same time he seems to be unbelievably light. "His face was very large, but it was still possible to humanity" (56). Furthermore what Syme finds most intriguing and unsettling is that Sunday's face curiously blends with his back. The detectives talk to Sunday in a "pitch dark room like a coal cellar" (104), but the encounter "startle[s] [them] like a blaze of light" (48). Sunday ignores or violates the laws of physics and suggestively hints at the realm of metaphysics. The grotesque component in the novel finds its culmination in Sunday, who embodies all the wonders, terrors and riddles of the universe, and hence may be regarded as the quintessentially grotesque character.

The gallery of grotesque portraits is inscribed into a burlesque inspired by the choreography of group dancing. In fact the sense of dancing, its rhythm, characteristic movements like jumping, and attributes like costume, underlie most of the narrative. It is interesting that even those sections of the discourse which strictly speaking refer to the pursuit, are charged with the element of dance. For example, Sunday running away from his pursuers

fell from the balcony, bouncing on the stones below like a great ball of india-rubber, and went bounding toward the corner of the Alhambra, where he hailed a hansom-cab and sprang inside it. [...] Shops and streets shot by like rattling arrows. At the highest ecstasy of speed, Sunday turned round on the splashboard

where he stood [...] raising his right hand swiftly, he flung a ball of paper in Syme's face ... (Chesterton 1981:155-6)

It may be said that *The Man Who Was Thursday*, like much of Chesterton's fictional writing, is saturated with Chesterton's medievalism which apart from his fascination with grotesque gargoyles of Gothic architecture, also comprises his love of chivalry, tournaments and colourful robes. However, in this novel medieval *dance macabre*, the Dance of Death, which to some extent embodies the sensibility of the Middle Ages, gets replaced with the Bakhtinian carnival, and the gruesome reminder of death is substituted with the joyful affirmation of life. In combining the principle of dancing with the convention of the grotesque, Chesterton makes ample use of artificial masks, costumes and uncanny exhibits, but in spite of the artificiality of all that masquerade, he puts across an existential message which explodes with the exuberance of real life.

The burlesque of the six defenders of order pursuing the enigmatic Sunday, whom they consider the most menacing and dangerous presence in the world, finds its climax in the fancy dress ball to which all the detectives-and-anarchists are invited. The fancy dress ball presents a parade of masks and ingenious disguises, where "every shape in Nature [is] imitated in some crazy costume" (Chesterton 1981:177). These disguises, however, do not really conceal, but reveal what seems to be most essential. So at this closing stage the farcical elements of the chase get absorbed into what turns out to be a cosmic dance, in which the ordinary and pedestrian are redeemed, and the transcendent seems to be shining through the commonplace aspects of things that resound with the echoes of the goodness of all Being.

There was a dancing lamp-post, a dancing apple-tree, a dancing ship. One would have thought that the untamable tune of some mad musician had set all the common objects of field and street dancing an eternal jig. And long afterwards, when Syme was middle-aged and at rest, he could never see one of those particular objects – a lamp-post, or an apple-tree, or a windmill – without thinking that it was a strayed reveller from that revel of masquerade. (Chesterton 1981:177)

## **5. Grotesque riddles: pursuit of Sunday and search for meaning**

In Chesterton's handling the element of playfulness is always conducive to epistemological discoveries. Accordingly, in *The Man Who Was Thursday* the search for meaning, which contains but also transcends the immediate experience, takes place via the transgressive, nonsensical, motley and jocular route of the grotesque. On the plane of fictional discourse the epistemological quest assumes the form of a question which reverberates throughout the whole narrative: "What can it all mean?" (Chesterton 1981:172) The question may slightly vary: "Was anyone anything?" (126), "Whatever all this pandemonium means..." (145), "What did it all mean?" (151), or even more desperately: "I want to know what the devil all this means..." (174) In spite of minor variations in purely verbal expression, the

core of that fundamental query remains the same, and it comes down to the enigma of Sunday.

So the question ‘what does it mean?’ gets transformed into an enquiry about the identity of Sunday: “Who and what are you?” (Chesterton 1981:180)

Who are you? What are you? Why did you get us all here? Do you know who and what we are? Are you a half-witted man playing the conspirator, or are you a clever man playing the fool? (Chesterton 1981: 154)

Sunday, first as Police Officer who organises the entire undertaking aimed at destroying the anarchist conspiracy, and then the Chief Anarchist himself, is not only in the centre of Chesterton’s adventure of pursuit, but he is also in the centre of the quest for meaning. Moreover Sunday, who combines apparent contradictions, challenges the laws of nature and transcends limitations, has the narrative status of the pivotal metaphor sustained throughout the novel. Although the only clues which he leaves for his pursuers are paper balls with absurd clusters of words, it does not prevent the detectives from comparing him not only to the whole world, but also to the entire universe.

Each man of you finds Sunday quite different, yet each man of you can only find one thing to compare him to – the universe itself [...] I think of Sunday as I think of the whole world. (Chesterton 1981:168)

Thus the question about Sunday becomes in fact a philosophical investigation into the nature of Being, with its metaphysical dimension inextricably tied up with the physical. Sunday is full of contradictions, capable of invoking and taming demons that haunt man’s life, but eventually he appears to the detectives as a colossal jester, who is both mischievous and benevolent. Paradoxically, the adventure of Syme and his companions offers and at the same time precludes a satisfactory solution; it baffles and simultaneously leads to an elucidation. When Sunday is directly approached with the question about his identity, he gives the answer which is just as enigmatic as the absurd messages in the paper balls, but it is also illuminating in its inscrutability:

You will understand the sea, and I shall be still a riddle; you shall know what the stars are, and not know what I am. Since the beginning of the world all men have hunted me like a wolf – kings and sages, and poets and law-givers, all the churches, and all the philosophers. But I have never been caught yet, and the skies will fall in the time I turn to bay. (Chesterton 1981:154-5)

In the fictitious world of “disguises [which] do not disguise but reveal” (Chesterton 1981:175) the movement of the narrative discourse is directed from the state of ignorance and anxious confusion to the state of serenity, relief and joyous elation. The massive face of Sunday, “filling the whole sky” (Chesterton 1981:183), which at the end of *The Man Who Was Thursday* grows larger and

larger to dominate the cognitive horizon that has been outlined during the novel's discourse, does not provide any explicit answer that could be contained in a logical verbal formula. Nevertheless it is justifiable to claim that within the grotesque framework, constructed and maintained in Chesterton's narrative, the grotesque itself is an answer for it gives an insight into the overwhelming and elusive nature of Being lying beyond words.

## 6. Conclusion

At the heart of the grotesque art lies what Philip Thomson identifies as "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response" (Thomson 1972:27). The clash, resulting from the encounter of the incompatibles, intrinsically belongs to the nature of the grotesque and refers to all its constituent elements. It should be emphasized, however, that the defining category of the grotesque is not only the clash, but also the strategic absence of solution. It makes the literary grotesque an especially apposite rhetorical strategy to convey the complexity, obscurity and the unsettling nature of existence. The words which Gregory addresses to Syme at the beginning of their epistemological adventure: "no human words can give you any notion of why I brought you here" (Chesterton 1981:23) capture the essence of the meaning and function of the grotesque in literature. Where the logic of the orderly discourse fails, and words prove their inadequacy, the grotesque remains a potent artistic device and a particularly fitting instrument to express the otherwise inexpressible reality, though most intensely and acutely experienced.

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