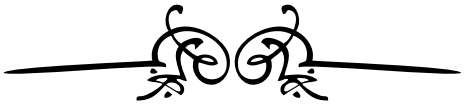
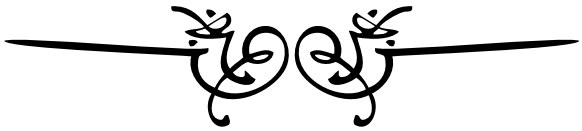


PART TWO

DRAMATOLOGICAL APPLICATION



CHAPTER FIVE

MYSTERY

5.1 Introduction to Chapter Five

In Part One of this study, the basic structure of what I call Chesterton's dramatology was outlined. It was shown that this structure, which takes into account the dramatic interactions between Chesterton's cosmology, epistemology and ontology, is geared towards upholding the dignity of man by means of the tools of analogy, paradox and defamiliarisation. In the previous chapter, I noted the fact that his vision is stereoscopic in that it revolves around the meeting of extremes as symbolised by the paradox of the Incarnation. For him, this coexistence of extremes illuminates the whole of reality. He therefore tends to fulfil his role as a reader by adding various correctives to the many one-sided, monoscopic perspectives that he encounters. Such one-eyed perspectives are nightmarish until they are recognised as "one universal [and therefore momentary] wink" (AD:5). Thus, for example, he answers materialism and spiritualism, not by saying that the material world is bad or that the desire to come into contact with the spiritual is wrong, but by suggesting that mystery and miracles are more rational than the biases of modernism may suggest; and also that it is these very mysteries that bring meaning to our materiality and spirituality. Then, he answers the misty notion of progress, not by suggesting that it is misguided to desire improvement, but by pointing to the concrete reality of practical revelation and surprise: a standard by which improvement can be judged. For Chesterton, mystery and revelation are both required for a sane view of life (Knight 2000:381; Wood 2011:29). A sense of the strange as that which transcends the bounds of human rationality and the secure as that which conforms with what is conceivable remains essential to participating in his dramatology (HO:213).

Mystery and revelation always remain two sides of the same coin of dramatology: two wholes that interlink and overlap in a paradoxical dance. The absence of one of these wholes would negate the double nature of the Incarnation that is the key to understanding Chesterton's interpretive perception. As a result, while one may stress mystery and revelation in different ways (as I do here and in the following chapter), both need to be considered as integrated and integral parts of the same dramatological perception. As suggested in the previous chapter, the primary point of this incarnational outlook is to keep both 'colours' vivid and vital instead of reducing them to an insipid

mixture. The "trend of good," in Chesterton's view, "is always towards Incarnation" (MM:63). To borrow from Stapleton (2009:17), the "keynote" sounded in Chesterton's work "is one of furious energy and industriousness as humanity and God merge in one long, continuing act of creation".

In the first part of this study, the first two objectives of examining and understanding Chesterton's dramatology have been covered. All that has been covered until now is intended to act as the subtext of what follows. It is the aim of the second part of this study, beginning with this chapter, to address the third objective of the study, which is to apply Chesterton's dramatology to the visual text of Malick's *The tree of life* (Gardner, Green, Hill, Malick, Pitt & Pohlad 2011).[1] It has been my contention that Chesterton's dramatology may be applied to a range of texts and artistic creations (Reyburn 2011; 2012). However, one primary reason may be given regarding the applicability of Chesterton's writings to Malick's film: both are concerned with life, not as an isolated event in a fragmented, meaningless, story-free world, but with life as it may be understood as operating metareferentially as a drama within a much larger drama. This is observable especially in that both Chesterton and *The tree of life* wrestle with questions raised by the story told in the Old Testament's book of *Job*. While there are further connections between Chesterton and *The tree of life,* such as their connection to the Catholic faith and even shared references to Thomas Aquinas and Walt Whitman (Schwartz 2011; Wisniewski 2011; Wood 2011:188), this remains the central point of departure for the following reading: both assume that life itself is a drama within a drama. Both examine the meeting of extremes: mystery and revelation, the known and the unknown, "nature and grace, God and man, being and not being, the infinite and the mortal" in order to consider the meaning of human existence (Wisniewski 2011).

Simply put, these next two chapters seek to answer the following question as one possible application of Chesterton's dramatology: If Chesterton were to watch *The tree of life,* how would he read it? Naturally, any answer to this question must be speculative, and yet I think that it is possible to present an interpretation that stays true to Chesterton's dramatological perception. After all, Chesterton writes that "[i]f there is a curious and fantastic art, it is the business of the art critics" and, I would suggest, academics "to create a curious and fantastic literary expression for it; inferior to it, doubtless, but akin to it" (MM:64). In the case of the present curious and fantastic study, my aim is to say something about the way that Chesterton's writings may inform a reading of *The tree of life*. The following analysis must be open to debate, contestation and revisions that extend beyond the reach of this present study, since the entire hermeneutic process concerns the necessity of opening

[1] For the sake of simplicity, whenever I refer to the film *The tree of life* (2011) from here on out, this reference is implied. I refer to the film in this thesis as Malick's, because it is clearly the incarnation of his creative vision, and is also clearly based on his own original screenplay. Only where I refer directly to Malick's (2007) screenplay for the film, has a reference been included.

up the meaning of a text rather than closing it. This is in line with Chesterton's love for "fruitful" thinking rather than "barren" thinking (IS:53), as well as Gadamer's (1975:581) charge that one would be a "poor hermeneuticist" to think that one "could have, or had to have, the last word". As was made clear in the literature review in Chapter One, there is an ongoing dialogue that surrounds the work of Chesterton. It is therefore merely my hope to contribute meaningfully to that conversation here, especially regarding the discipline of visual culture studies.

In a number of ways, *The tree of life* is an ambiguous visual text, but its very ambiguity is a strong indication of its artistic richness. It is composed of layered narrative elements that are intercut with an array of images from nature and culture, and it does not seem that the filmmakers are that intent on telling the viewer exactly what to think about everything that is being presented. If a picture says a thousand words, then the myriad images of *The tree of life*, in companionship with the dialogical and musical elements of the film, must say many more words than a study of this kind could ever contain. However, the ambiguity of this film, together with the fact that it raises more questions than it answers, certainly invites a multiplicity of readings.

When contemplating the work of Chesterton, Wood (2011:187) suggests that "[a]ll great works of art are subject to diverse and even contradictory interpretations" to avoid being reduced to "disembodied formulation[s] of [their] significance". Ambiguity and the resulting multiplicity of readings should invite further engagement with the original text instead of merely treating it as an equation to be solved in disincarnate fashion apart from the being of the text. The interpretation, while being a text on its own, is not meant to replace the original artwork. To be clear, what follows is my own subjective application of my own theory regarding Chesterton's dramatology to the film in question. In no way can I pretend that it is exactly what this colossal genius would have said or deduced from watching such a film, and yet I am convinced on the basis of the things already discussed in the preceding chapters that what follows at least indicates some of the ideas that he may have highlighted given the kinds of issues he is wont to address in his work.

I have chosen to address the subject of finding mystery in *The tree of life* by focusing on the bookends of the film: the introduction, with its lengthy creation sequence and its focus on the tension between nature and grace, and the conclusion of the narrative referred to as the eternity sequence. This focus particularly highlights the Chestertonian consideration of the human drama as something that takes place within the mysterious drama of the Divine. It is also fitting that mystery should be dealt with in this way for a few other reasons. Ultimately it is mystery that forms the context or home for revelation and surprise. Also, the bookends of *The tree of life* focus on the figure of an adult Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn), whereas the main body of the film — in acts two to four —

focuses on the boyhood of the same character (Hunter McCracken). By framing the analysis of the film in this way, mystery is symbolised by the presence of maturation, whereas revelation is symbolised by the discoveries and epiphanies of childhood.

5.2 Finding mystery in *The tree of life*

The tree of life opens with a quotation from the book of Job (38.4, 7): "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? … When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" This scriptural reference is followed by an image of an abstract, fiery light surrounded by darkness, perhaps hinting at the burning bush encounter between Moses and the voice of God in the book of Exodus (Figure 1).

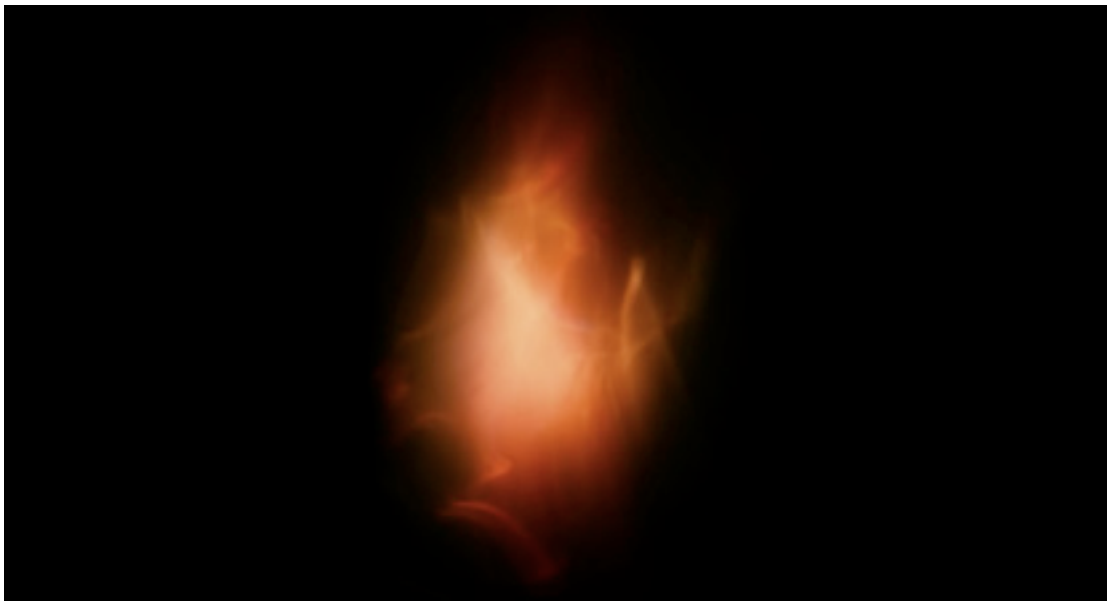


Figure 1. The light of God.[2]

As the light glows and changes shape, the voice of a man whispers, "Brother. Mother. It was they who lead me to your door".[3] If this utterance is taken as being addressed to God, the intimations of the entire film start to fall into place. The film seems to be a kind of prayer: a cinematic mediation on

[2] All images that appear in this thesis are taken from *The tree of life* (Gardner *et al* 2011). As with references to the narrative of *The tree of life*, and for the sake of simplicity, this reference should be taken as implied throughout, especially since all images in this study are taken directly from the film.

[3] Since the aim of this study is to present a Chestertonian reading of the film, any transcriptions provided, especially when they may seem ambiguous, are transcribed in such a way as to align with Chesterton's thinking. Thus, in the case of this quotation, I am aware that this same text can be rendered thus: "Brother, mother, it was they who lead me to your door," implying that the speaker is in fact addressing his brother and the mother. This reading does, however, make the *they* in the utterance more ambiguous than in helpful for the interpretation that I am offering here.

the intricate relationship between the divine and human dramas, and therefore also between the sacred and the secular. The voice of the man tells us that it was his brother and his mother that brought him to the dwelling place of God. Their embodied and remembered presence in his life has been a reminder of the presence of the Divine, and their concrete being has been an indication that the smallness of human life must be understood within a much larger drama.

The voice that utters these words belongs to an adult Jack O'Brien, the central protagonist in this story. But his pronouncement captures something beyond the specifics of his own life. In Malick's (2007:ii) first draft of the screenplay, he notes that "[t]he 'I' who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, [the author] hopes that you might see yourself in this 'I' and understand this story as your own". The story, then, is not just the story of one man and his family in central Texas in 1956, but a story that evokes the story of every person at every time (Malick 2007:1). It is a story about what it means to be a human being participating in an incomprehensibly big drama.

Figure 2. Images of grace in nature.

As the image of the light in the darkness fades, tranquil choral music plays and the voice of Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain), Jack's mother, speaks:

> The nuns taught us that there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself, accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked; accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself, get others to please it too, likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things.

Mrs. O'Brien's voice is accompanied by a series of images that are introduced to hint at awe, harmony and serenity: sunflowers waver in the breeze; sunlight seeps through a lone cloud; a girl gazes out at a farm from a window; the same girl is seen holding a kid goat, feeding some cows and being embraced by her father (Figure 2). These pastoral scenes — images of grace in nature — are then changed for a few images of the O'Brien family around which the film centres: Mrs. O'Brien sits on a swing

attached to a tree in the middle of the front yard, watching her three young boys play; the O'Brien family sits around the dining room table, prays together, eats, and then plays soccer outside; the three boys chase after their mother outside on a dirt road, laughing and smiling; they climb a tree (Figure 3). In these images, it is clear that the mother is "especially drawn to her middle son," named RL (Laramie Eppler), who is the "sweetest, most genial of the boys" (Malick 2007:1). RL is the brother that Jack has already referred to at the opening of the film.

The camera follows RL as he walks away on his own, and Mrs. O'Brien's voice explains that the nuns "taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end". The complexity of this statement is only hinted at as we shift from domestic scenes to an image of a raging waterfall, a symbol of power and danger in nature (Figure 3). The screen goes dark and Mrs. O'Brien continues: "I will be true to you, whatever comes". Again, this *you* referred to here implies God and it intimates what the rest of the film confirms, namely that Mrs. O'Brien has chosen to follow the way of grace, which "doesn't try to please itself". This intimation points to a dialectic that is at the heart of the narrative of *The tree of life*: Mrs. O'Brien is the incarnation of grace, while her more rigid and competitive husband, known to us only as Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt), is the personification of nature, which is filled with antagonisms and restlessness. The fact that this couple embodies a marriage of nature and grace tells us that the question of whether one ought to follow nature or grace is not as simple as choosing one in order to negate the other. Marriage, after all, is the union of the incompatible (WW:46). Nevertheless, it is particularly the bold presence of nature that acts as a preface to grace (Aquinas 1951:30).

Figure 3. Scenes in the life of the O'Brien family.

This dialectic of nature and grace that is captured in the paradox of the Incarnation reflects "two truths" that Chesterton sees in the world: "the truth of the supernatural world, and the truth of the natural world, which contradicts the supernatural world;" the truths of heaven and earth (ST:86).[4] Chesterton points to ancient myths in order to note that in "a hundred forms we are told that heaven and earth were once lovers, or were at once one, when some upstart thing, often some undutiful child, thrust them apart" (EM:91).[5] It is in this "primeval vision of the rending of one world into two" that one finds the hint of a few ultimate ideas (EM:91). As with any divorce, the split between heaven and earth does not mean that the two become entirely distinct as if there were no marriage in the first place; a memory of earth remains in heaven and a memory of heaven remains on earth. The presence of the one is still felt in the other. Those who view heaven and earth as utterly distinct are unable to reconcile the statement "God is Spirit" with the statement "the earth is his footstool" (BC:13). In addition, the split between heaven and earth does not mean that heaven and earth are two equal but opposite forces that are now in two entirely different places. Earth has always been contained within heaven, but in the event of the Fall, as explained in the third chapter of Genesis, human beings are simply less aware of the reality of heaven. The mysteriousness of mystery has become less than apparent.[6]

The narrative and various tensions in *The tree of life* demonstrate that the paradox of nature and grace is uneven. Nature and grace are not equal opposites anymore than earth and heaven are. Instead, just as the mysterious realm of the supernatural forms and informs the context of the natural, so

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[4] This idea ties in direction with Chesterton's understanding that temporality and eternity may be seen as directly interlinked via the paradox of the Incarnation. This can also be observed in von Balthasar's (1998:247) contention that when the Son, the second person of the Trinity, "definitively embraces the world in his Incarnation and enters the sphere of time, he does not leave eternal life behind". Moreover, the Incarnation — the revelation of God in human form — implies that it is precisely by God's indwelling of temporality that allows people to receive and share in eternal life (von Balthasar 1998:247). The event of the Incarnation and the ongoing work of the Incarnation through the body of Christ, the church, implies the meeting of temporality and eternity; the expectation of eternal life begins with the revelation that eternal life begins in the present (Willard 1998:19). Von Balthasar (1998:250) suggests that if, "in Jesus Christ, eternal life has genuinely penetrated the world's temporal sphere; this temporal sphere does not unfold 'outside' eternity but within it". In line with this, it is very likely that Chesterton's emphasis on the Incarnation allows him to see temporality and eternity as participants in the same dance.

[5] Because Chesterton's writings do not deal directly or systematically with the subject of the relationship between heaven and earth, it is difficult at first to decipher his exact opinions on the subject. He oscillates between referring to heaven as a future reality to referring to it as a present reality, a "playground" where people "love each other"(AT:43,54). He suggests that it is the dwelling place of God, and that God left this dwelling place to set the world right. He also contends that the "human instinct for heaven" is as "local as a home". Then, more commonly, he tends to use the word *heaven* metaphorically (EM:90). Of course, he is not a systematic theologian and, as discussed in the previous chapter, his thinking moves away from the over-automisation of any idea. These different uses of the word *heaven* suggest that Chesterton's view on the subject at least hint at the complexity of the idea as it is expressed in the bible. Heaven is both a present and a future state; it is both evident and hidden, real and metaphorical. Arguably, it is this very paradoxical engagement with heaven that Chesterton is considering when he discusses his sense that human beings are all a state of "exile" or "holy homesickness" and yet also capable of feeling at home while in this state of exile (HO:212; MA:108).

[6] The division between heaven and earth is not a dualism in the sense that heaven is the "good bit" and earth is the "bad bit," but rather a duality in the sense that both heaven and earth are part of the same good, although fallen creation (Wright 2005:176). Heaven and earth were once in a holy union and the divorce of heaven and earth is equally problematic for both. Wright (2005:51) argues that within "the twofold created universe, humans have the capacity to investigate things on earth; but only God, and perhaps other beings like angels, have the capacity to understand, and (should they wish) reveal to mortals, the things in heaven". From this perspective, earth is what is known and heaven is what is initially kept secret. As a result, revelation may be understood as the disclosure of the (present and yet-to-be) secrets of heaven on earth. Revelation may therefore be understood as making God's will known 'on earth as it is in heaven'; or, in Joseph Ratzinger's (2005:345) words, as "[making] God visible in the world".

grace provides a context for nature. The unevenness of this paradox is concealed by the fact that nature and the natural may be deemed more easily discernable than the supernatural and grace. And yet, as Malick (2007:14) claims, "competition" or "the struggle for existence" that seems to have resulted in the "ascent of life" is ultimately "not life's fundamental law". The grace of co-operation "succeeds where naked power and selfishness do not" (Malick 2007:14). Even Chesterton notices that the notion of the "Struggle for Existence" is often misunderstood to mean "an actual struggle between candidates for survival" or "cut-throat competition," when it really means that those who survive are simply those who have the tools to adapt (WS:61-62).[7] Nowhere does this imply that the tools of adaptation need to be hardy and violent. This struggle for existence has less to do with violent combat between competing animals than it has to do with the ability possessed by animals to co-operate with a changing environment. Even in Chesterton's reading of Darwinian evolution, he notices that there is a hidden mirth beneath the more obvious elements of the drama (HO:366; WS:62). He also notices the possibility that softness may be better armour than brittleness (MA:2).

Here we see that Chesterton sees no insurmountable conflict between nature and grace. I am aware that he sometimes overstates his case against science, as in the introduction of *The ball and the cross*, where "the narrator likens the creations and discoveries of science to the work of a demonic succubus" (Wood 2011:20). But this does not mean, as Wood (2011:20) concludes, that Chesterton makes "a complete disjunction between nature and grace". He may sometimes overstress the conceptual distinction between the two for the sake of rhetorical force, but he most certainly also considers the ways in which they overlap. On the subject of human nature, for instance, he suggests that "Man is a contradiction in terms" by being both part of nature while remaining somehow distinct from nature; "he is a beast," and therefore an animal, whose "superiority to other beasts consists in having fallen" (BC:5). If Chesterton argues for the difference between nature and grace, it is only to attack various "forms of scientific scepticism [and] determinism" for trying to do the work that religion should be doing (WS:62). He suggests that science needs to be acutely aware of its own limitations, lest it force itself into trying to accomplish what it was never intended to:

[7] Certainly, it may be deemed fair to empirically observe, as Charles Darwin (1859) does, that the one most adaptable to change is more likely to survive. Herbert Spencer (1864) repackaged this idea in the form of the famous phrase "survival of the fittest". But as soon as *adaptability* or *survival* are viewed as being somehow better than their opposites, the scientific stance of that observation has been transcended. It is precisely this imposition of such value judgments that makes the theory of evolution more philosophical or immaterial than scientific even when it presents good evidence for its value to the sciences. In accordance with what has already been discussed, it is the scientist who is required explain what has changed and, in observable terms, how. In Chesterton's terms, it is the job of the philosopher to explain or speculate on why the change may have occurred and whether or not the result is better or worse (AT:94). On the way that evolution straddles the line between science and philosophy, Wright (2007:95) observes that Darwin was not so much a great new thinker, "coming out from nowhere to his radical new idea, but rather the exact product of his times, one particular high-water mark in the onward rush of liberal modernist optimism...". It is exactly this that explains why Darwin's ideas were so readily and uncritically embraced by the first audience of his writings (Wittgenstein 1966:26). Accordingly, Darwin's compelling theory became a legitimising scientific anchor for a cultural mood and especially for the modernist myth of progress.

> Science can analyse a pork-chop, and say how much of it is phosphorus and how much is protein; but science cannot analyse any man's wish for a pork-chop, and say how much of it is hunger, how much custom, how much nervous fancy, how much a haunting love of the beautiful. The man's desire for the pork-chop remains literally as mystical and ethereal as his desire for heaven. All attempts, therefore, at a science of any human things, at a science of history, a science of folk-lore, a science of sociology, are by their very nature not merely hopeless, but crazy. You can no more be certain in economic history that a man's desire for money was merely a desire for money than you can be certain in hagiology that a saint's desire for God was merely a desire for God. All this kind of vagueness in the primary phenomena of study is an absolutely final blow to anything in the nature of science. Men can construct a science with very few instruments, or with very plain instruments; but no one on earth could construct a science with unreliable instruments. A man might work out the whole of mathematics with a handful of pebbles, but not with a handful of clay which was always falling apart into new fragments, and falling together in new combinations. A man might measure heaven and earth with a reed, but not with a growing reed (HO:117).

For the religiously minded person, the view of the naturalist fails "to throw any doubt on any religion" at all (IL:74):

> The Book of Genesis does not say that God formed the substance of the world out of atoms, and therefore a scientist cannot be rebuked as a Bible-smasher if he says it is formed not of atoms, but of electrons. The Council of the Church which laid down the dogma of the Co-eternity of Father and Son did not lay down any dogma of the Conservation of Energy. Therefore Mme. Curie could not be burned as a heretic even if, as some said, her discovery disturbed our ideas about the Conservation of Energy. The Athanasian Creed does not say that parallel straight lines never meet, so it would be unaffected by Professor Einstein saying, if he really does say, that they are not parallel or even straight. The prophets did not prophesy that a man would never fly, and are, therefore, not discredited when he does fly. The saints certainly never said there was no such thing as wordless talking, and therefore have nothing to retract if there is such a thing as wireless telegraphy (IL:74-75).

Here Chesterton seems to be suggesting that it is possible for science to be quite complementary to faith and thus for nature to be complementary to grace. But for the materialist, whose world is only made up of what is perceivable and provable by the senses, there can only be nature and "Darwinian biology" (IL:76). Chesterton repeatedly notices that the explanations of naturalists ultimately leave us in the dark about a great many things: "What remains is mystery — an unfathomed and perhaps unfathomable mystery. What remains after Darwin is exactly what existed before Darwin — a darkness which I ... believe to be divine" (IL:76). Chesterton recognises that this mystery may be interpreted differently, as divine or not, but that it remains dark nonetheless (IL:76). Still, assuming by faith that this obscurity is an indication of the Divine, he offers that if the changes in nature were to eventually be completely explained, he would be unsurprised if the theories of the naturalists were given some credence (IL:77). Chesterton is not intent on "exorcising the devil of evolution" in any absolute sense as Wood (2011:21) seems to argue, but only wants to point out that "any complete

explanation by a complete evolution is at present impossible" (IL:77).[8] If anything, in accordance with this penchant for defamiliarisation, Chesterton uses rhetoric to jolt the evolutionist out of his complacency in order to persuade him to reconsider the object of his faith.[9] Even in his later work, Chesterton admits to remaining "agnostic about the agnostic deductions" of Darwinians (AU:305). His problem is not with opening the evolutionary question, but with closing it (Ker 2011:721). His primary issue is not with Darwinism, but with treating Darwinism as an empirical proof of the irrelevance of theology or even as a genuine alternative to the Christian faith (AT:94; WS:62). Furthermore, he is at odds with any scientific theory that would seek to examine human nature an absolutely objective sense, thereby dehumanising the human subject (EM:23; Clark 2009:142).

By embracing mystery, the seeming contradiction between the natural and the supernatural, and between nature and grace, becomes a lopsided camaraderie. It is only sin — the introduction of evil into the good creation — that causes the breakup of this friendship between the two halves of the incarnational paradox. However, at the start of *The tree of life,* this camaraderie has not yet been resolved in the mind of Jack O'Brien. He seems to be asking himself whether he will follow the way of grace displayed by his mother and brother or the way of nature embodied by his father. The opening line, together with the utterances of Mrs. O'Brien in the exposition already hint at an answer: Jack, who is revealed in the film to be more in alignment with the way of nature, is still drawn to the way of grace. The way of nature seems to him to be inadequate for navigating life when it is isolated from the way of grace. This isolation is stressed by a few fleeting glances at Jack's obvious estrangement from his wife: the two of them occupy the same space and yet seem to find it difficult to communicate. His inability to reconcile nature and grace as a child seems to have had a lasting impact.

Nevertheless, this implied romance towards grace is not delimited within the comfort of an idyllic home life, but rather within the context of trauma. Embracing the way of grace, then, is to be understood as the acceptance of contradiction, for it assumes the reality and inevitability of suffering (Wisniewski 2011). Trauma, which is shown from various angles throughout the narrative, is first revealed when a "Western Union man" delivers a telegram to Mrs. O'Brien some years later that informs her of the death of her middle child, RL (Malick 2007:1) (Figure 4).

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[8] Clark (2009:132) points out that the hasty adoption of Darwinism was heavily criticised by Chesterton because it was unscientific and also that it was only in the 1930s that the synthesis of Darwinian theory and Mendelian genetics answered these critiques. Clark (2008:132) writes, "Nowadays, it is imaged that 'the theory of evolution' is a single theory, and that all those who criticized Darwin were therefore 'creationists'. The truth is otherwise". Some argue that there is much concerning the theory of evolution that is observable and demonstrable, but matters of macro-evolution and the idea of an evolutionary goal remain theoretical at best. Richard Dawkins (2006:50) concedes that evolution is "blind to a goal," but makes this judgment based on his own philosophical presuppositions of what it meant by a "goal".

[9] On one occasion, Chesterton parodies evolution in order to attack the "uncritical enthusiasm for evolution" shown by HG Wells in his *Outline of history* (Wood 2011:18). He uses the example of a rhinoceros who was "so benevolent a Futurist as to start an improvement that could only help some much later rhinoceros to survive," thereby suggesting that "the real riddles that arrest the eye" are not explained by evolutionary theory in a way that is completely satisfactory to the intelligence (IL:58).

Figure 4. A Western Union man delivers a telegram.

While the audience remains unaware of exactly what happened to RL throughout the duration of the film, the telegram to Mrs. O'Brien and the telephone call to Mr. O'Brien both indicate that their son was away from home. This distance, echoed and emphasised by the impersonality of the medium of the telegram as well as the spatial division between and vocal disembodiment of husband and wife in the case of the telephone call, draws attention to all the ways that the drama of humanity can become fractured and even disembodied. Yet somehow it is this very trauma that pulls people together and helps them to recognise their connectedness to others. The paradox of this trauma is therefore reminiscent of the paradox of the crucifixion of Christ, where the union between man and God is made possible by a division between the Father and the Son; where the anguish of Christ suggests "an abyss that is not for our thoughts" when "God had been forsaken of God" (EM:212).

We watch as two grief-stricken parents try to come to terms with the weight of their loss. Nature and grace seem to be irreconcilable at this point in the story. Soon after hearing the news, Mrs. O'Brien, distraught in her grief, tells her husband that she just wants to die, thus offering a second reference to the book of *Job*. There is an overtly religious overtone to the scenes that follow, where we hear someone utter the words, "He's in God's hands now" and another, whose voice resembles Mrs. O'Brien's, say, "He was in God's hand the whole time". The latter is uttered more as a question than as a straightforward statement, for if RL, who had followed the good way of grace, was in God's hand's all the time, how could God have let him come to such a bad end? This strikes a chord of scepticism that resonates throughout the film.

As we see Mrs. O'Brien interact with those who mourn with and for her, we hear her voice offer a short, disjointed prayer: "My hope. My God. I shall fear no evil. What did you gain?" An older woman, possibly her mother, tries to offer some comfort to her, but her comfort is poorly formulated, insensitive and taken badly. The woman explains, introducing a third reference to the book of *Job*, that the "Lord gives and the Lord takes away. That's the way he is. He sends flies to wounds that he should heal". The assumption in this pronouncement, a weakly formulated theodicy, is that God was the direct cause of their loss and pain. Even if he was the source of their suffering, no attempt is made in *The tree of life* either to absolve or condemn the Divine. The trauma uncovers the riddle that is at the heart of being without trying to resolve it with tidy rationalisations.

Figure 5. Jack enters a world of memory.

There is an obvious uneasiness between the comforters and the O'Briens as they fail to understand their grief. They "go away dismayed and apprehensive ... They are themselves bewildered" (Malick 2007:3). Malick (2007:3) suggests that death "reveals the emptiness that was there before". It exposes the fragility of everyone in proximity to its wake. Like Job's comforters, the general impression given by the comforters of the O'Brien family is "not that God is good but that God is so strong that it is much more judicious to call Him good" (IJ:xviii). They try to be optimistic by attempting to make "everything in the universe [fit] into everything else: as if there were anything comforting about a number of nasty things all fitting into each other" (IJ:xix). They fail to provide comfort by insisting upon explanations. They fall into a kind of insanity by losing everything except their ability to reason (HO:222). The screen goes black and the strange, shapeless light reappears. This is soon followed by fast moving, blurred city lights (Figure 5). Jack speaks again: "How did you come to me? In what shape? What disguise?" How, he seems to be enquiring, can one discern the

presence of the Divine in the midst of such trauma? These words are accompanied by another series of images: a fifty-something year old Jack walks through an open door, perhaps symbolic of the door of God mentioned earlier, and wanders around outside in the sun; seagulls fly up ahead; a vast open salt plain is traversed; Jack wakes up in silence without speaking to his wife; he lights a candle and remembers his life as a young boy playing baseball with his brothers and, on a different occasion, sitting next to RL, enjoying his company (Figure 5).

As he ponders the memory of his brother, Jack speaks: "I see the child that I was. I see my brother: true, kind. He died when he was nineteen" (Figure 6). As images of business meetings, cityscapes and skyscrapers fill the screen to indicate man's dominance over nature (Figure 7), Jack continues: "The world's gone to the dogs. People are greedy; it's getting worse ... How did I lose you? Wander? Forget you?" Once again, the *you* here is deliberately ambiguous, perhaps referring to Jack's loss both of God and of the memory of his brother. He considers the fact that the world that he lives in follows the way of nature. It is hostile and, in both metaphorical and literal ways, violent. It seems to understand nature, but has lost any semblance of grace.

Figure 6. Jack remembers RL.

Figure 7. Man's assertion of dominance over nature.

The world we are looking at in *The tree of life* is a world of memory, but it is especially a world remembered through the lens of grief. Chesterton borrows Maurice Baring's description of memory as a "puppet-show," thus indicating, perhaps recalling his puppets in *The surprise,* the fact that memory, while reflecting the reality that has occurred, remains a mental construction (AU:32). Again, by revealing a paradox, he contends that the trouble with memory is that "the things we remember are the things we forget" (AU:43):

> I mean that when a memory comes back sharply and suddenly, piercing the protection of oblivion, it appears for an instant exactly as it really was. If we think of

> it often, while its essentials doubtless remain true, it becomes more and more our own memory of the thing rather than the thing remembered. I had a little sister who died when I was a child. I have little to go on; for she was the only subject about which my father did not talk. It was the one dreadful sorrow of his abnormally happy and even merry existence; and it is strange to think that I never spoke to him about it to the day of his death. I do not remember her dying; but I remember her falling off a rocking-horse. I know, from experience of bereavements only a little later, that children feel with exactitude, without a word of explanation, the emotional tone or tint of a house of mourning. But in this case, the greater catastrophe must somehow have become confused and identified with the smaller one. I always felt it as a tragic memory, as if she had been thrown by a real horse and killed. Something must have painted and repainted the picture in my mind; until I suddenly became conscious about the age of eighteen that it had become the picture of Amy Robsart lying at the foot of the stairs, flung down by Vamey and another villain.[10] This is the real difficulty about remembering anything; that we have remembered too much — for we have remembered too often (AU:43-44).

This is not to suggest that memory cannot be reconciled to the events that have actually occurred, but rather that the mental impressions left by memory need to be understood as a form of grieving. Memory itself is the result of loss, for one only remembers what is no longer present. It is therefore primarily a reflection of that loss and the human inability to reclaim what has been lost. This is significant in that it points to the way that *The tree of life* does not pretend to be offering an exact, literal replica of actual events. Rather, it presents a subjective, sometimes distorted, always edited view of things. It is a construction, albeit one that aims at reconstruction and reconciliation. It may be considered a search or analogy for a truth that resides in and beyond the confines of its own mediated character.

In particular, the film, with its emphasis on the disruptive traumas that invade existence, raises a question that is at the heart of the book of *Job*, namely the question of "why the innocent suffer in this strange world" (Dell 1991:1). This question is especially pertinent in the light of the tension between nature and grace, because it asks how one can follow the way of grace when the way of nature so often seems to hold primacy. It is particularly potent to this dramatology in that Chesterton, with his theology of gift, has often been accused of being somewhat oblivious to the darker side of life (Knight 2000:373). Knight (2000:373) argues that this accusation is probably the result of Chesterton's emphasis on "the joy of existence" — a subject dealt with shortly — and his seeming marginalisation of the problem of suffering. However, with Knight and Wood (2011:2), I believe that this is a misreading of Chesterton. While the joy of existence remains paramount to his thinking, he certainly has a great deal to say on the darker, more nightmarish subjects in life. In fact, the question of suffering and its relationship to the problem of evil may be regarded as an implied

[10] With this reference to a historical event, it may also be possible that the particular image that Chesterton has in mind is *The death of Amy Robsart* (1877) by the British painter William Frederick Yeames (1835-1918).

theme is much of his writing, and especially by the fact that he so frequently refers to the very book of *Job* that *The tree of life* is paying homage to.

Chesterton returns to the subtext of *Job* time and again, reflecting his belief that the "*book of Job* is better worth hearing than any modern philosophical conversation in the whole philosophical world" (in Knight 2004:146). For him it embodies various battles, most obviously between good and evil, but also between justice and injustice, perception and reality, optimism and pessimism, and creation and evolution (IJ:xvii-xviii). I have already noted that *The surprise* presumes a hidden dialogue much like the one that takes place between God and Satan in *Job*, but it needs to be noticed that this same intertextual reference in found in some of Chesterton's other works of fiction as well. For instance, *The man who was Thursday* opens with a conversation between a civilised man named Gabriel Syme and an anarchic poet named Lucian Gregory before shifting to the main drama of the story (MW:12). In a similar manner, *The ball and the cross* (1910) begins in a flying ship high above the ground with a conversation between a humble monk named Michael and an arrogant scientist named Lucifer. It is only after this pretext has played out that the narrative shifts to the drama on the ground (BC:12). The names of these characters cannot be overlooked. *Gabriel* and *Michael* are the names of two archangels and *Lucian* and *Lucifer* recall the archangel who fell by standing against God — the very same angel who appears at the start of *Job*.

These examples clearly reflect an idea at the heart of Chesterton's dramatology, namely that even the smallest fight for morality has cosmic significance. Even the smallest matter of good versus evil is not small, and the drama within the larger drama is of paramount importance. The fact that Chesterton is dealing with references to angels and a fallen angel should not be passed over too quickly. Angels, symbolically speaking, are messengers and ambassadors of God whose primary task is to carry the words of God to man in a way that they may be perceived and understood. They are to the Judeo-Christian tradition what Hermes, from whose name we get the word *hermeneutics*, is to Greek mythology. They are a means by which God bridges the gap between earth and heaven, and therefore between nature and grace. The fallen angel Lucifer represents one who has distorted and misrepresented the message of God. Thus, these cosmic dialogues, figurative mirror images of the cosmic dialogue that takes place in the book of *Job*, deal with the question of how the will and ways of God may be negotiated and interpreted in the light of what is actually evident within the created order.

Chesterton observes that *Job* presents "a philosophical riddle and a historical riddle" (IJ:ix). To begin with, he addresses the historical riddle, which relates to the authorship of the book. He notes that there is a great deal of debate in academia surrounding the manner in which the book was

composed, but that such debate, still evident in contemporary biblical scholarship (Newsom 2003:3-11), should not be prioritised too highly:

> The Book of Job may have grown gradually just as Westminster Abbey grew gradually. But the people who made the old folk poetry, like the people who made Westminster Abbey, did not attach that importance to the actual date and the actual author, that importance which is entirely the creation of the almost insane individualism of modern times (IJ:ix-x).

By implication, Chesterton insists that one should read the text within its own historical context, at least insofar as we understand that context. And, for him, the context of ancient history reveals that there was "more unity in those times in a hundred men than there is unity now in one man. Then a city was like one man. Now one man is like a city in civil war" (IJ:xi). Chesterton insists that one should make an attempt to understand the book in the terms of its first audience to the extent that one can imagine what the first audience was like, and in relation to the kind of questions that the author was actually trying to address. He suggests, for instance, that if one expects Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to be about a "Danish pirate prince," one should be prepared to be disappointed by the time taken by the protagonist to kill his enemy (IJ:xii). In Chesterton's estimation, even a half-truth of an assumption, as in this example, is enough to throw one's interpretation drastically off course.

Chesterton goes on to place *Job* within the context of what he deems to be the central idea of the Old Testament, namely "the idea of all men being merely the instruments of a higher power" (IJ:xii). While he is arguably creating an overly contrived division between the Jewish scriptures and the Christian New Testament, he wants to show the reader that the narrative of the Old Testament hinges around the character of God, who from his own point of view seems like the only real character in the Old Testament; "compared with His actuality all the sons of flesh are shadows" (IJ:xiv). This note is struck repeatedly in the Old Testament to demonstrate that ultimately God "knows better what He is doing" than man (IJ:xiv). Within this context, Chesterton contends that *Job* stands quite alone among the Hebrew scriptures as the book that most emphatically questions the purpose of God that the other Jewish scriptures tend to take as a given: "What is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use his tools; let God break his tools. But what is He doing and what are they being broken for?" (IJ:xiv). It is these same questions that resonate throughout *The tree of life*. For example, Mrs. O'Brien challenges the Divine to answer her in her grief when she asks, "What did you gain?" Whatever the answer may be, the three texts in question —*Job*, *The tree of life* and Chesterton's writings — do not provide an expected or simple answer.

In the light of these questions, Chesterton expresses his opinion that the "present importance of the Book of Job cannot be expressed adequately even by saying that it is the most interesting of ancient books" (IJ:xiv). He adds that even if we insist that it is "the most interesting of modern books" we do not begin to cover the matter, because it tackles philosophical issues that transcend the particularities of ancient and modern times (IJ:xiv). What is needed is a cosmic philosophy: a philosophy that is capable of fitting a cosmos (IJ:xvii). While this echoes back to the discussion of Chesterton's cosmology in Chapter Two, the primary point that Chesterton is making about *Job* is this: while it may be an ancient book that was constructed in accordance with ancient forms, its questions have a much larger resonance. Indeed, this eternal resonance is felt just as acutely in *The tree of life* as it is in that ancient story. And yet, just as *Job* moves from mystery to grace and an encounter with the Divine, so *The tree of life* foreshadows a similar event of reconciliation even at the start as we find Jack in a glass elevator, apologising to his father over the phone for some kind of misunderstanding. We are not privy to the nature of the misunderstanding, but this moment of reconciliation hints at a greater hope that propels the narrative of the film. The elevator seems to become a connector between earth and heaven, and therefore between nature and grace, much like Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28.12). Low angle images such as this one in the elevator are shown often in *The tree of life* (Figure 8). The viewer is frequently reminded to look up at the daylight sky, past buildings and trees, perhaps for some higher meaning. These low angles images transform the world into "sacred spectacles of exaggeration" (TT:5).

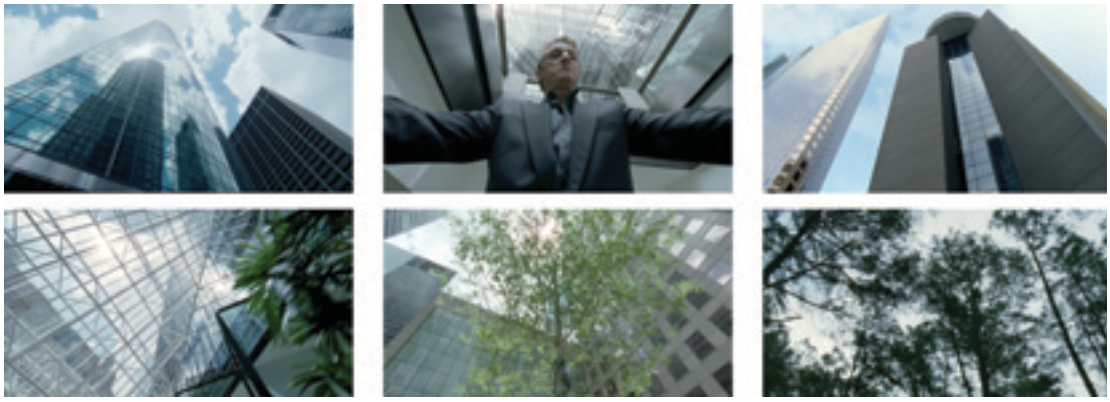

Figure 8. A few low angle shots from the first act of *The tree of life.*

Chesterton argues that looking at things from the position of smallness is preferable to seeing them from a great height (TT:6). After all, "Satan was the most celebrated of Alpine guides, when he took Jesus to the top of an exceeding high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth" (TT:6). These images remind us that greater joy is found, not in beholding smallness, but in beholding largeness:

> It is from a valley that things look large; it is from the level that things look high; I am a child of the level and have no need of that celebrated Alpine guide. I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help ... Everything is in an attitude of mind; and at this moment I am in a comfortable attitude. I will sit still and let the marvels and the adventures settle on me like flies. There are plenty of them, I assure you (TT:7).

This is the perspective of humility. The sky always points beyond itself: what is seemingly an opaque, pale blue is an illusion of the light that exposes the limitations of human vision. Behind it are "patterns of the cosmos" that people have put into "the shape of maps and genealogical trees" (EM:223). The sky, therefore, is iconic of God's drama — the heaven within which the human drama takes place. This interpretation is confirmed in one scene in *The tree of life* in which Mrs. O'Brien, holding her infant child in her arms, points to the sky and proclaims, "That's where God lives" (Figure 9). If one reads this moment too literally, one may assume that Mrs. O'Brien believes in a distant, remote God, but the larger backdrop of the film indicates that this is not so. She often speaks to God in whispers and sighs, always seemingly aware of a sacred presence in, through, around and beyond her.

Figure 9. Where God lives.

The tree of life again moves from scenes of Jack's life in the world of business to his memories of his parents. We see a cityscape at dusk, the sky swarming with birds, each one a dot moving perfectly in harmony with the flock. Mrs. O'Brien's voice is heard addressing God: "Was I false to you?" We see her walking outside in a forest, looking up at and through the tall pine trees. An expression of calm comes over her face and the screen goes black, again revealing the strange, edgeless light that appears at the very start of the film. This movement from the light of images to the blackness of the screen

points to the division between human perception and the divine drama, but also suggests ebbing in and out of sleep. It evokes the sensation of trying to wake up. The stories captured in a great deal of ancient mythology carry a similar sensation. They may be taken as "dreams about realities" (EM:113). As vivid and real as they seem when they come into contact with "tender or tragic things," they "can really make a sleeper awaken with the sense that his heart has been broken in his sleep" (EM:114). The melancholia evoked here is akin to the struggle faced by the O'Briens. They are unable to perceive the true radiance of reality, because grief, overwhelming enough to have almost become a new, hegemonic metanarrative, has also become an anaesthetic.

Mrs. O'Brien continues her interrogation of God: "Lord, why? Where were you?" The final question may be read as having a double nature. The speaker addresses God, but also allows her question to be spoken as if it is a question posed to her by God, as when God asks Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38.4). Chesterton suggests that God moves from this question to a statement that almost hints at a date "when the sons of God shouted for joy. One cannot help feeling, even upon this meagre information, that they must have had something to shout about" (IJ:xxiv). The fact that Chesterton highlights the same question that is quoted right at the start of the film, with the idea of joy at its centre, is significant in that it shows that he and Malick both recognise and long for the good end that grace has been rumoured to promise. It is Mrs. O'Brien's question concerning the whereabouts of God that ushers in what is arguably one of the most powerful sequences in cinematic history, referred to by Malick (2007:13) simply as "The creation": In this creation sequence — a visual feast that recalls the discussion on Chesterton's cosmology earlier in this study — we see "the growth of the cosmos, the great epic of evolution, from the Big Bang through the long ages of geological time, down to the present day". This sequence acts as an answer to the question that Chesterton believes is at the centre of *Job*, namely the question of what is actually real, rather than what only seems to be real (IJ:xvii). However, the answer to the question, reflecting the great entrance of God into Job's story, is ultimately a means to unveil even greater mysteries. In the end, the nature of reality is of greater importance than momentary afflictions. There is, in other words, a desire for a note of exclamation to resonate in order to satisfy and quieten the noise of interrogation (IJ:xxiii). Grace, in the end, does not conquer nature, but "transforms and renovates the natural" (Wood 2011:13).

Chesterton explains that a "more trivial poet would have made God enter in some sense or other in order to answer the questions" that have been posed to him throughout Job's story (IJ:xix). But God answers with about fifty questions in which a paradox is presented: God turns out to be even more remote and mysterious than Job and his friends had suspected; and yet his very presence in the story of Job at this point demonstrates his nearness; the rhetoric of the Divine is both understandable and

elusive (Newsom 2003:235). Similarly, a more 'trivial' filmmaker may have tried to order the grief of the O'Briens around more philosophical dialogue. However, just as "[i]n this drama of [the] scepticism [of Job] God Himself takes up the role of sceptic" (IJ:xix), so in *The tree of life* the human drama is pushed backstage in order to be replaced by a powerful reverie in the aesthetics of incomprehensibility. We watch as:

> [m]olecular clouds gather to make galaxies, which sail out through the void like ships on a sea without shores. New stars, new worlds are born and pass away, like wasted seed. They are the furnaces in which the elements of our future life are smelted. Many experiments must be tried and rejected before our system is hit upon; much labor expended, with continual improvements through long ages. At last the ancestral earth appears; a bulb of gases, more like a star than a planet, seared by the sun's fire, glowing like a coal from deep within (Malick 2007:13) (Figure 10).

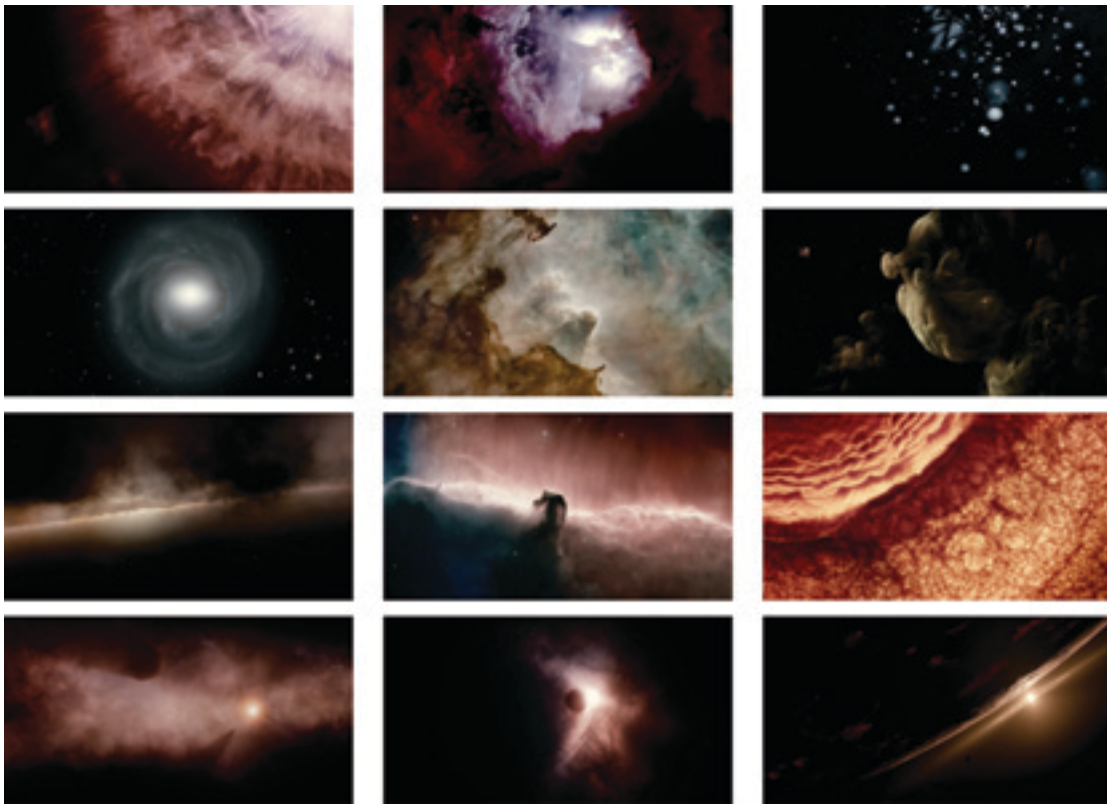

Figure 10. The beginning of the creation sequence.

What is also shown, although never explicitly explained in the film, is the "beginnings of need, of purpose and will; the unmistakable marks of identity, the first true signs of self" as well as the idea that creation is not "an event in the distant past, the result of a finished and forgotten act, but rather ... something which happens at every moment of time: no less a miracle now ... than it was in the beginning" (Malick 2007:14). All of this, however, is not meant to be a removed God's-eye-view of creation, but is something conjured by the imagination of the protagonist (Malick 2007:16). It is more man remembering God than God imposing his purposes on man. The clarity of a supposed

God's-eye-view perspective is not afforded the human spectator in any way that would not distort perception: After all, to echo an idea mentioned above, "[o]ne sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak" (SW:477).

Creation, Malick seems to be saying, is always seen through "human eyes" with the result that "human shapes" are read into what is seen (Schwarz 2011). As these images pass before us, we are confronted with all the ways that reason fails to explain what is perceived. These are the marvels of God, through which God "turns rationalism against itself" as he does through the book of *Job* (IJ:xix):

> The poet by an exquisite intuition has made God ironically accept a kind of controversial equality with His accusers. He is willing to regard it as if it were a fair intellectual duel: 'Gird up now thy loins like man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me'. The everlasting adopts an enormous and sardonic humility. He is quite willing to be prosecuted. He only asks for the right which every prosecuted person possesses; he asks to be allowed to cross-examine the witness for the prosecution. And He carries yet further the corrections of the legal parallel. For the first question, essentially speaking, which He asks of Job is the question that any criminal accused by Job would be most entitled to ask. He asks Job who he is. And Job, being a man of candid intellect, takes a little time to consider, and comes to the conclusion that he does not know (IJ:xx).

God, who is cast as the ultimate sceptic in this play, completely uproots the scepticism of the other actors, not by suggesting that they are wrong to be sceptical, but by arguing that they are wrong to think that they have been sceptical enough. Chesterton writes that when "dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt, it is not the right method to tell him to stop doubting" (IJ:xxi). Instead, it is "the right method to tell him to go on doubting, to doubt a little more, to doubt every day newer and wilder things in the universe, until at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt himself" (IJ:xxi). Doubt should never be turned into a prejudice that prevents understanding (IS:177). Chesterton's method is to take the thought to its logical conclusion, to push it until it breaks. This approach, he contends, has long since been the "logical weapon of the true mystic" (IJ:xx). It is by adopting an even higher scepticism that doubt is transcended. The supposition that the problem of human suffering will be solved on the basis of the assumptions made by the other sceptics is overthrown. This divine soliloquy forces those willing to listen into casting their scepticism upon itself. It is shown that to have "religious faith" one must also possess "philosophical doubt" (IJ:xxi). Doubt and belief are companions here. "God comes in at the end, not to answer riddles but to propound them" (IJ:xxi). In the same way that Sunday is revealed in *The man who was Thursday,* God steps into the story as an "amalgam of darkness and light, of distance and nearness, of the hidden and the revealed — a figure who, in sum, throws everything off balance by not being easily

identifiable" (Wood 2011:189). His presence, as Wood (2011:189) observes, is just as "discomforting as it is assuring".

The riddles of God are presented to Job in the form of a long series of questions, whereas in *The tree of life* they are shown simply as images. Malick's (2007:13-18) screenplay suggests that the purpose of these images, rather than simply inspiring awe or creating an aesthetic experience, is to raise questions and to entice the audience to contemplate each event in the light of human existence. So, for example, the narrative arc of the creation sequence suggests that nature "seems to be leading towards something" (Malick 2007:17). But this mysterious sense of purpose raises a number of questions: "Why this delay in arriving at its ends? Why does it feel its way along — wander, dawdle, delay? Why twist and turn and backtrack, as though it were finding its way through a maze? Why establish hindrances and obstacles only to put itself [through] the trouble of devising stratagems for overcoming them?" (Malick 2007:17). Whatever the answers to these questions may be, the images cannot tell. They are merely witnesses to a mystery. They are analogies and sacraments. We may ask as much as we like why things had to be the way they were, and yet our questions remain powerless and unanswered against the backdrop of this edited history of the cosmos. The "enigmas of Jehovah" ultimately seem "darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job" and the questions of the O'Briens, and yet it is these very enigmas that bring comfort (IJ:xxii). We have been "told nothing" and yet we are confronted with the "terrible and tingling atmosphere of something too good to be told" (IJ:xxii). Chesterton writes that "[t]he refusal of God to explain his design is itself a burning hint of his design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man" (IJ:xxii).

Chesterton argues that the two commonplace lenses used by people as they navigate the world, namely the lenses of optimism and pessimism, run into some difficulty as the riddles of God are divulged. But before this can be explained, it is worth pointing out the absurdity of the verbal explanation of these two ideas, which declares that optimism thinks the world "as good as it [can] be" while pessimism thinks the world "as bad as it [can] be" (HO:269). An optimist cannot be someone who thinks "everything right and nothing wrong" in the same way that everything cannot be right and nothing left (HO:269). Whatever optimism or pessimism mean, they cannot mean the absence of negativity on the one side and positivity on the other. Ultimately, Chesterton settles on an allegorical definition of optimism and pessimism "given" accidently "by a little girl": "'An optimist is a man who looks after your eyes, and a pessimist is a man who looks after your feet'" (HO:269). An optimist, Chesterton elaborates, is the "happier thinker who considers ... our primary power of vision and of choice of road" whereas the pessimist is "that more dreary thinker who thinks merely of our contact with the earth from moment to moment" (HO:269). Despite his concerns with further definitions of optimism and pessimism and those wear these lenses, ultimately Chesterton notes

that there is a "deep mistake" in this distinction between the optimist and the pessimist in that both terms assume "that a man criticises this world as if he were house-hunting, as if he were being shown over a new suite of apartments" (HO:269). This is precisely the error that God exposes when he interrogates Job.

> If a man came to this world from some other world in full possession of his powers he might discuss where the advantage of midsummer woods made up for the disadvantage of mad dogs, just as a man looking for lodgings might balance the presence of a telephone against the absence of a sea view. But no man is in that position. A man belongs to this world before he begins to ask if it is nice to belong to it. He has fought for the flag, and often won heroic victories for the flag long before he has ever enlisted ... [H]e has a loyalty before he has any admiration (HO:269-270).

Ultimately, Chesterton insists, any acceptance of the universe is more akin to patriotism than it is to optimism or pessimism (HO:270).

> The world is not a lodging-house at Brighton, which we are to leave because it is miserable. It is the fortress of our family, with the flag flying on the turret, and the more miserable it is the less we should leave it. The point is not that this world is too sad to love or too glad not to love; the point is that when you love a thing, its gladness is a reason for loving it, and its sadness is a reason for loving it more (HO:270).

When Chesterton suggests that optimism and pessimism are both "arguments for the cosmic patriot" (HO:270), he is pointing out that whatever we may think of the world, it remains our home. Even if we misunderstand it, like it or dislike it, we remain bound to it. Even if we choose for nature and against grace, the way of grace is still very much a part of its reality and vice versa. Chesterton explains that ultimately what acts as a transformative agent in the world is the love of a place that has "a transcendental tie ... without any earthly reasons" (HO:270). Thus, virtues, in his opinion, are cultivated primarily by devotion rather than criticism, as in the case of the Hebrews of the time of the Exodus who "gained their morality by guarding their religion" (HO:271). For instance, it is only by clinging to things by loyalty that one discovers the courage that one has to fight for them (HO:271).

This strange dance between optimism and pessimism is found in *Job* and, if only subtly, also in *The tree of life*. By always insisting that the explanation for tragedy is patently clear, Job's friends may be called pessimists, while Job, who insists that the explanation is not yet perceptible, remains the eternal optimist (IJ:xvii). But God steps in and "knocks down pessimists and optimists with the same hammer" (IJ:xxii). God is "explicit to the point of violence" when he insists "that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained. He insists on the inexplicableness of everything; 'Hath the rain a father? ... Out of whose womb came the ice?'" (IJ:xxii-xxiii).

> He goes farther, and insists on the positive and palpable unreason of things; 'Hast thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is, and upon the wilderness wherein there is no man?' God will make man see things, if it is only against the black background of nonentity. God will make Job see a startling universe if He can only do it by making Job see an idiotic universe. To startle man, God becomes for an instant a blasphemer; one might almost say that God becomes for an instant an atheist. He unrolls before Job a long panorama of created things, the horse, the eagle, the raven, the wild ass, the peacock, the ostrich, the crocodile. He so describes each of them that it sounds like a monster walking in the sun. The whole is a sort of psalm or rhapsody of the sense of wonder. The maker of all things is astonished at the things he has Himself made (IJ:xxiii).

By transcending the conflict between optimism and pessimism, and perhaps even between nature and grace, a deeper truth is unmasked, namely the fact that joy pervades all of creation. Paradoxically, the Almighty turns out to be more optimistic than the optimists while being more sceptical than the pessimists. Even the deepest grief is recognised, because it contravenes the deeper human desire for delight. Creation occurs out of joy, not necessity or despair, and, despite being interrupted with grief, life has its foundation in this very same joy. The riddles of God are ultimately driven more by happiness than sadness (IJ:xxiv). This is shown not to dismiss or diminish suffering, but rather to emphasise that the context of suffering is hope, which is an especially deep mystery. Whether suffering can be explained or not, at least in any clearly rational sense, it is neither the controlling narrative nor the end of the whole story insofar as Chesterton is concerned.

Chesterton, writing to his then-fiancée Frances Blogg concerning the death of her sister Gertrude in 1899 comes to the conclusion "that all good things are one thing" and that this "one thing" was sacramentally present in many good things in this world (in Ward 2006:97). Even in grief, we should not feel that "comedy has gone out of our theatre" (in Ward 2006:97). Chesterton points to the scripture that emphasises just how "precious" the "death of one of his saints" is to the Lord, and suggests that it is a "miraculous remark about anybody" (in Ward 2006:101). The death of a loved one could not be considered "happy or providential or sweet or even perhaps good," but it may be viewed as "precious" (in Ward 2006:101). He continues:

> It is this passionate sense of the *value* of things: of the richness of the cosmic treasure: the world where every star is a diamond, every leaf an emerald, every drop of blood a ruby, it is this sense of *preciousness* that is really awakened by the death of His saints. Somehow we feel that even their death is a thing of incalculable value and mysterious sweetness: it is awful, tragic, desperately hard to bear — but still 'precious' ... Forgive the verbosity of one whose trade it is to express the inexpressible (in Ward 2006:101, emphasis in original).

Chesterton grapples with the idea of loss as much as with the feeling of loss and decides that despite not knowing how exactly the universe is ordered, he must conclude that it remains good in the sense

that it is spiritual and thus connected to the dramatic purposes of God (Ward 2006:104). Death is not felt as beautiful, because it leaves an absence in its wake that is almost impossible to comprehend. But for Chesterton, death does not mean this absence to imply the absence of reconciliation or the termination of being. Rather, absence implies presence elsewhere (Ward 2006:104). Absence does not destroy the value of a thing, but heightens it. This sentiment is congruent with Chesterton's view of death as the most democratic event in human existence; it is that which "most levels men" (IS:223). Only in such universality can genuine fraternity and equality be possible (IS:224).

This stress on the value of things, and especially the profound value of people, is echoed in the images of the creation sequence in *The tree of life*. Everything seems to be "the fruit of long, painstaking labor and calculation — brought forth with equal care" (Malick 2007:17). Remarkably, all of life is just as alive as we are. It is the reminder of our instinct to dwell on life itself, rather than on the pain of death; to see the uniqueness of every being within the theatre of the cosmos and to notice that cheerfulness is always "breaking in" from the outside in much the same way that the Author in *The surprise* breaks into his own play (SU:63; Ward 2006:102).

The larger context within which *Job* and *The tree of life* places the human story points to the Chestertonian idea that the "Kosmos [sic]" should always be thought of first and "the Ego afterwards" (in Ward 2006:103). Existence is intoxicating only when it is not considered in egocentric terms (Ward 2006:104). Here again is a reminder of Chesterton's insight into the power of humility. Humility allows one to empathise with "an intrinsic and eternal point of view" that is the only view that will allow a person to truly enjoy anything (DE:80). As an example of this, Chesterton writes that "[a]ll full-blooded and natural people, such as schoolboys, enjoy humility the moment they attain hero worship" (DE:81). Egotism, which emphasises distance and objectivity, robs a person of the gift of seeing anything up close (DE:83). "The philosopher of the ego sees everything, no doubt, from a high and rarified heaven," writes Chesterton; "[O]nly he sees everything foreshortened or deformed" (DE:83). In particular, Chesterton says that he does "not believe" in adopting a non-human perspective that would result in him "being dehumanised in order to study humanity" (EM:23). But humility, as the "art of reducing ourselves to a point," allows us to see all "cosmic things" for what they "really are": they are things "of immeasurable stature" (DE:84). "Humility" is therefore "the mother of giants" (SW:477). The loss of humility ultimately results in the loss of this "colossal vision" that notices the value of things (DE:85). This is to say that it is humility that allows one's vision to be clear, even during the darkest of times.

Through his visual artistry, Malick (2007:18) notes that "[w]hile everything in creation "sings in the great chorus," man "alone does not. Why?" From Chesterton's view, the answer is that man has

tried to make himself out to be both more and less than what he is. It is true that man is the only wild animal in that he alone has broken from the mould set by nature, but he has also forgotten that he should admire nature and consider the part he has to play as a steward of the environment (HO:349; Wood 2011:28). Man is a tree — perhaps a tree of life — in a story about a forest. Malick's answer corresponds with this. For him, man's sense of being separate from the larger drama comes from having lost a sense of the eternal, both within us and outside of us (Malick 2007:18). The question of how we might recover the eternal, to which this creation sequence is hinting, becomes the central focus of the rest of the film. The solidity of the imagery before us is meant to be recognised as an icon in the cathedral of the universe; it is something that points beyond itself to that which is inexplicable. It is, so to speak, a stained glass window rather than a stone in the cathedral of the cosmos. If we fail to see grace beyond nature, we are in danger of seeing reality as an impersonal collection of conflicts, for nature is equally apt at giving and taking away without paying any attention to those who have been affected either by its generosity or its destructiveness. Nature, like Sunday in *The man who was Thursday*, may be a sign of God's immanence (Wood 2011:208), but it is also certainly a signpost to God's transcendence.

In Chesterton's work, just as there is a link between humility and democracy (DE:68), there is also a link between humility and Christian mysticism. The mystic "seeks a version of the universe in which everything becomes orderly, in which monsters become natural, and grasses supernatural, in which the mammoth is as mild as the primrose, and the lion lies down with the lamb" (ID:77). This should not be seen as the polar opposite of the humility that reduces the self to a point, but rather as its paradoxical counterpoint: humility produces a sense of both wonder and welcome. Mystical humility seeks a sense of the value and meaning of things without necessarily being able to explain everything. It suggests at least part of the journey that needs to be taken before the way of grace can be translated into ordinary life.

Mysticism "is not an exceptionally dark and secret thing, but an exceptionally luminous and open thing" that is sometimes "too clear for most of us to comprehend, and too obvious for most of us to see" (ID:78). As a sense of the mystery in things, mysticism is not an elitist or aristocratic discipline practiced by only the select, gifted few, but the product of enormously democratic common sense (ID:79). It is simply the conviction that everything has its right place and its right purpose, even if these are not discernable. Chesterton writes that the "true key of Christian mysticism is not so much self-surrender, which is a painful and complex thing, as self-forgetfulness, which we all fall into in the presence of a splendid sunrise or a little child, and which is to our highest nature as natural as singing to a bird" (ID:81). This self-forgetfulness, which I believe is at least part of the purpose of the creation sequence in *The tree of life,* supports Chesterton's belief that however we live and move in

the world, we ought not to try to tame it. We should not "sin against the variety of life" by assuming that everything ought to operate in accordance with our own restricted understanding of the world (DE:69).

One thing that *The tree of life* manages to do is represent life as an immense and complex thing, and I believe that Chesterton would applaud such a vision, especially since he particularly appreciates subtlety in the face of complexity (IS:165). On one occasion, for example, he accuses the ancient Greeks of "blighting the world with a stringent one-sided ethical standard," thereby disenchanting Elfland (DE:69-70). In particular, he refers to the way that the Greeks came to adopt a very one-sided view of what beauty is and therefore came to place a particular mode of representation above accepting things as they are. In Greek mythology, for example, "the chimera was a creature whom any healthy-minded people would have been proud; but when we see it in Greek pictures we feel inclined to tie a ribbon around its neck and give it a saucer of milk" (DE:70). For Chesterton, room needs to be left for the ugly and the grotesque even in matters of the imagination (Figure 11). Humankind has a "natural love of size, vitality, variety, energy, [and] ugliness" that needs to be cultivated and understood, not feared or suppressed (DE:70). It is only in smallness and humility that life can be received as a gift (HO:235).

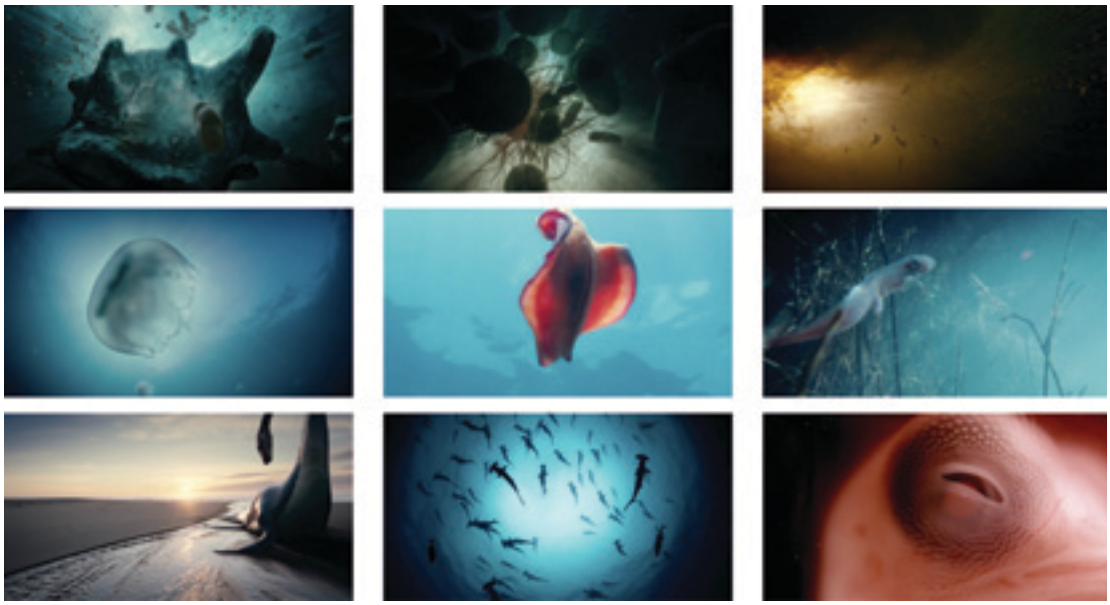

Figure 11. A complex and grotesque vision of life.

Arguably, this earth that the creation sequence in *The tree of life* paints is not the face of mystery, but its back. No one can look at God and live, and so we, like Moses, are forced to look only at his afterglow as it is found in his handiwork (Exodus 33.23). This idea is best expressed by Chesterton towards the end of *The man who was Thursday* when Gabriel Syme exclaims: "Shall I tell you the

secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face?" (MW:160). On this, Wood (2011:213) writes:

> We have largely lost our liberty to relish the world's mystery ... not because we perceive and thus desire too much, but because we envision and thus create too little. Our pathetic purblindness shuts us off from both the perception and the creation of the fantastic. It blinders us from the mysterious transformation of one thing into another, especially the making of sinners into saints. This drastic *metanoia* occurs because everything natural has its own entelechy, its inherent aim and goal that pushes it toward its completion and fulfillment within a larger ... *telos*.

Chesterton claims that things may deceive us "by being more real than they seem. As ends in themselves they always deceive us; but as things tending to a greater end, they are even more real than we think them" (ST:164). He argues that most things are simply unfulfilled, more indicative of potentiality than of actuality (ST:165). The hope of getting to see the front of this hidden face of mystery is sometimes only achievable "by way of indirection, by means of what Hopkins names as the 'counter, original, spare, strange'" (Wood 2011:213). The problem is not that mystery, and thus the presence of God, is too far removed to be discerned, but that it is too close and too real to be defined (Wood 2011:214). Everyone needs to be surprised into seeing what is right before their eyes. The very fact that the creation sequence in *The tree of life* interrupts the narrative of the film so abruptly is perhaps an attempt to achieve this kind of defamiliarisation. But it does not do this by merely representing things that are beautiful. Granted, there is a great deal in the sequence that is aesthetically pleasing, but the passing of time through various stages of evolution includes a great deal that is, in the Chestertonian sense, grotesque and even ugly.

The grotesque is one of Chesterton's favourite tools for achieving defamiliarisation. Milbank (2009a:64) writes that "the effect of the grotesque is first to destabilize perception; second to render unstable the human belief in itself as the centre of the universe; third to make the reader experience the wonder and ecstasy of pure otherness". In the case of the third consequence of the grotesque, the purpose is "not an estrangement, but a participation" (Milbank 2009a:64). In the creation sequence, therefore, images such as those of volcanic eruptions, dinosaurs, jellyfish, bubbles and solar systems call the reader into a deeper engagement with the very nature of creation (Figure 12). Moreover, the viewer is compelled to consider his own position within this cosmic drama. The images become at once a reminder and an invitation: they remind the reader that man is a creator and that his ability to create is, by design and beyond reason, an invitation to participate in the creative nature of God (EM:34; Milbank 2009a:64). As a response to the grief portrayed in the drama, they are intended to

shake the reader out the blindness of habituation. They are mementos of the fact that whatever we may believe, our present experiences do not tell us the whole story.

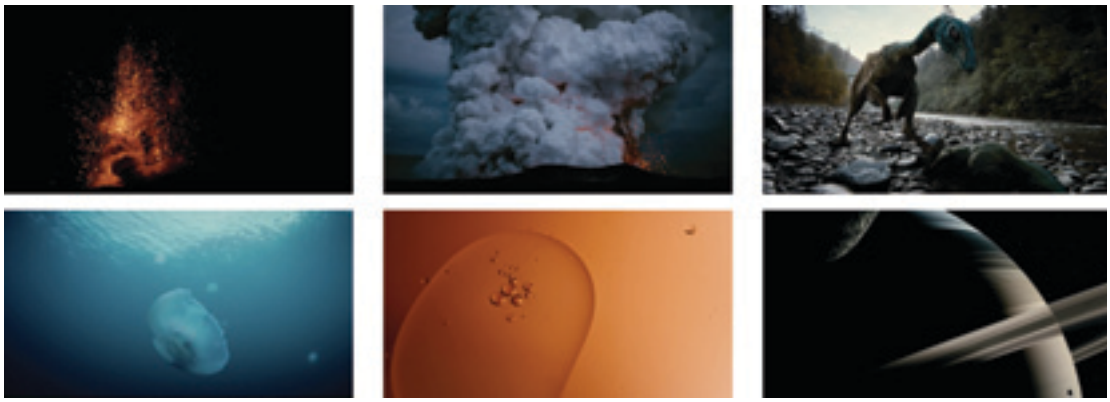

Figure 12. Volcanic eruptions, dinosaurs, jellyfish, bubbles and a planet from our solar system.

Suffering remains a mystery, but Chesterton acknowledges that it is precisely through suffering that people are given an opportunity to "discern and embrace the deepest and truest things — bravery, goodness and glory" (Wood 2011:217). Somehow suffering becomes a means by which a person can come into contact with the expansiveness of reality. It is clear from the narratives of *Job* and *The tree of life* that the various struggles of life are not necessarily the result of human sinfulness and that suffering is therefore not always deserved. Suffering may even be recognised as being unavoidable; as somehow intrinsic to human existence. Even the suffering that leads to the ripping of a solid curtain is somehow crucial for letting the light in. Chesterton looks at the story of *Job* and notices a paradox in history that presents the "best man in the worst fortune" (IJ:xxvii). Therefore, Job pre-figures the wounds of Christ (IJ:xxvii). His suffering, like the suffering of the O'Briens, is not intended as a suggestion that torment is overcome only when it is understood. In fact, it is precisely in torment that the bounds of reason are thrown into question. Even the nature of God is thrown into question. Moreover, his suffering does not merely encapsulate the "Greco-Roman ideal of 'education through suffering'" even while it may be a great teacher (Wood 2011:220). Suffering is not seen only as a factory of moral lessons. Rather, as Chesterton sketches it, it is the means by which redemption is made possible insofar as it is a kind of communion in God's suffering with humanity. By sharing in his suffering, the "People of God can suffer and redeem the abominations of both moral and natural evil" (Wood 2011:221). It is not by might or power that goodness overcomes, but rather by simply being good (IJ:xiii). Goodness, even in its smallness and apparent defeatedness, overcomes evil.[11] This, Wood (2011:221) observes, "is the staggering paradox that animates Chesterton's entire work". It is also the paradox of *The tree of life*: the way of grace is not only found beyond or apart from

[11] This is arguably why Chesterton uses the humble monk Michael to topple the arrogant stance of a Professor of science in *The ball and the cross*.

the way of nature, but is that which is found in nature. It is the inescapable core of all being that overcomes by being overcome.

"Grace," as Mrs. O'Brien says, "does not try to please itself, accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked; accepts insults and injuries". Grace even accepts the incomprehensibility of its own nature. It allows the riddles of God to work their way into the human story. It sees, despite darkness and confusion, that everything belongs. This does not present us with a picture of cheery optimism, but acknowledges the complexities and traumas of life as being somehow, we know not why, part of the drama. This insight may not necessarily appease the desire that some have for tidy explanations, but it does point out that ultimately explanations, especially those bound to a karmic moral system of cause and effect suggested by the comforters of Job and of the O'Briens, fail to come close to what is really going on. To make any attempt to justify what God himself does not seem to justify is to enter into the domain of argumentative futility, because it attempts to speak of things that are not within the human limitations of understanding even while they shape and inform the hermeneutic experience.

For Chesterton, as I have mentioned, the central question in *Job* does not concern why the innocent suffer, but rather deals with the relationship between perception and reality (IJ:xvii). Grace, by accepting even what opposes human existence and peace, is essentially the acknowledgement that even in the context of the unintelligible, what is real is always preferable, even if it remains elusive (IS:259). This reality must always be chosen freely by individuals. Chesterton writes that "[r]eal human life differs from all imitations of it in the fact that it can perpetually alter itself as it goes along" (IS:259). It is this quality of freedom that makes life more dramatic than any drama by Shakespeare (IS:260). Human beings have the freedom to "[assert] the will against the power of nature" even while "thanking the Redeemer by partially sharing in his sufferings" (ST:96). Where Chesterton defends free will, he does so with one primary aim. Rather than merely invoking free will to explain the presence of evil in the world, he reminds the reader that it is possible to choose what is good. And it is in choosing this good that the value and dignity of people is rediscovered. This journey towards the good that being may be viewed as a romance, with romance referring to "that innate desire in human beings for a sense of home or belonging in the company of what is perceived" (Reyburn 2011:59). For Chesterton, "this romance as a preoccupation with coming home to the good involves constantly realigning oneself with the riddle of being in order to apprehend an answer" (Reyburn 2011:59). It embraces mystery, in gratitude and humility, in order to leave room for what can actually be known.

This is why I have noted that seeing clearly "is made possible because aspects of objective reality are concealed" (Reyburn 2011:60). One can only see by the light of the sun, for example, when one is not preoccupied with the eye-damaging activity of looking at the sun. What is apparent is directly dependant upon what is mysterious. Being that is all answer and no riddle is likely to produce only a kind of conceptual blindness. Seeing clearly is directly related to situating oneself within a much larger drama instead of simply getting stuck in a monologue. Chesterton says that the trouble with the modernist, is that his "musical instrument ... has broken all its strings but one" (WS:89). Nevertheless, he continues to strike "the same few chords of truth remaining in it," resulting in the consequence that it is only a narrow monotony that is inevitable with rationalism (WS:89). What he therefore asks us to do is to consider life in all its "fullness, ... richness, and ... variety" (WS:89). It is in considering life in its glory and participating in its goodness that one's interpretive experience is likely to be broadened and challenged rather than merely reinforced.

Figure 13. Jack walks through the doorway to eternity.

Towards the end of *The tree of life,* we hear the young Jack O'Brien speak to God of how he did not know how to name him even though it was so clear that God had always been calling him. And yet he also addresses his parents: "Father, mother, always you wrestle inside me". The tension between nature and grace is not an easy one to navigate, and every indication of the film is that it is never completely resolved in the protagonist. However, the romance of being is a romance of hope, always directed towards reconciliation and renewal. This hope is represented in the eternity sequence that acts as a counterpoint to the creation sequence. After watching Jack ascend once again in a glass elevator, we see him transported, if only in his mind, to an open desert landscape. The frame of a door — perhaps the door of God — stands alone out in the daylight sun, and we watch as he walks

through it (Figure 13). We then see a range of images that, like the creation sequence, seem to have no direct relation to the story of the O'Brien family: a small black dot, presumably the earth, floats against the backdrop of a violent cluster of solar flares; a river of volcanic magma flows towards an unknown destination; a lonely planet is burnt up by the heat of a dying star; a distant star is seen from a desolate landscape; a solar eclipse fills the screen (Figure 14).

Figure 14. The end of time.

We hear someone whisper, "Follow me" and watch as a woman, holding a candle in the dark, lights the candle of someone else. We then see a strange sight: the adult Jack O'Brien is found in a rocky landscape alongside his younger self. Both of them are walking away from us. A few more images are shown, all connoting a climb towards some kind of higher meaning: an open gate, an ancient landscape and a ladder (Figure 15). Jack prays, "Keep us, guide us, to the end of time". In these images, Malick (2007:124) is trying to represent the unrepresentable: "We pass beyond death. We arrive at the eternal, the real — at that which neither flowers nor fades, which neither comes into being nor passes away — that in which we might live forever".

Figure 15. An open gate, an ancient landscape and a ladder.

A hand reaches out from a grave, an image of resurrection, and is taken by an angelic figure (Figure 16). We see Jack walk through another door into the darkness, perhaps indicating that what we are seeing now and what we are about to see is not a neat, explicable picture of plausibility. This is *the* mystery.

Figure 16. Resurrection and eternity.

The primary content of the eternity sequence is made up of images of hundreds of people on a beach, walking peacefully together, barefoot as if they are on holy ground. The adult Jack is completely caught up in this event. He falls to his knees, but eventually stands up and keeps going. Eventually he finds his mother and embraces her. He finds his father too, but only puts his hand on his shoulder, perhaps as a sign of solidarity. Together, these two encounters reveal more obviously that Jack has found the way of grace, which accepts that "this is God's world, and not an infinite plain of chaos and sorrow after all" (Malick 2007:125). This new realisation brings Jack to accept that although "he must linger here a while yet, he will not despair. New life lies before him. [He now possesses a] faith which sees through death" (Malick 2007:125).

Figure 17. Reunion.

Following this, Jack sees RL, his brother who had died many years before. RL appears as he has appeared throughout the film: as a boy. There is no explanation given for his presence on the beach, but no explanation is intended or needed. After all, the beach symbolises a timeless state of being. The adult Jack picks up the boy RL and carries him a short distance. Soon afterwards, Mr. O'Brien, deep relief and a newfound kindness etched onto his face, picks RL up and carries him to his wife. She is

overwhelmed by the sight of her once-dead son, but soon finds comfort and peace in the mystery of his presence. She utters the words, "I give him to you. I give you my son" (Figure 17).

At this moment, Mrs. O'Brien is recognised for what she has been a symbol of throughout the film. Her first name has not been revealed in this story, but it would not be amiss to assume that it is Mary, for she is pointing very clearly to the Mother of Jesus. The *you* in her utterance is ambiguous once again, but as a reflection of an incarnational paradox it is probably intended for both God and the viewer. God remains God, the "Maker of all things visible and invisible" and "the Mother of God is in a rather special sense connected with things visible; since she is of this earth" and the created order; "through her bodily being God was revealed to the senses" (WS:130). She is indeed grace — a gift — that has made the invisible God visible to people. "Our Lady, reminding us especially of God Incarnate, does in some degree gather up and embody all those elements of the heart and the higher instincts, which are the legitimate short cuts to the love of God" (WS:130). RL, the child who by his death shares in the suffering of Christ, is the son that is given, freely and willingly, for the brokenness of the world. This is the final mystery that *The tree of life* points to. Chesterton has known all along that God is telling a story, but what this film is proposing, which also just happens to be what Chesterton has been proposing, is that God's story is also our story. God's drama has always been intertwined in ours. Even the deepest mysteries open the ocular athlete up to surprise and revelation. It is to the question of how this revelation may be found through Chesterton's dramatology that this study now turns.

CHAPTER SIX

REVELATION

6.1 Introduction to Chapter Six

It has become clear that to avoid degenerating into a nightmarish monoscopic or totalistic vision, Chesterton relies on a stereoscopic view that holds mystery in tension with what may be called surprise or revelation. In the previous chapter, I began a two-part application of Chesterton's dramatology to *The tree of life* by emphasising the mysterious dimension of his dramaturgical hermeneutics, which suggests that the theodrama of God permeates the human story in ways that are not always easily discernable, apparent or even intelligible. This chapter now focuses on revelation, which, while being discernable within material reality, does not mean the eradication of mystery or transcendence. Rather, revelation points to that which can be known and experienced within the confines of our own being.

The interaction between mystery and revelation is likened by Chesterton to the game of hide-and-seek. He observes that hide-and-seek "is a popular pastime [that] assumes the truth of the text, 'Seek and ye shall find'" (AT:65; Matthew 7.7). Any ironclad, totalistic mindset that refuses the hospitality of defamiliarisaiton prevents genuine participation with the text, resulting in the absence of both seeking and finding, and therefore the absence of both mystery and surprise. To remedy this, mystery or mysticism supports the recovery of a clear view and a deliberate appreciation of reality that goes beyond generalised impressions into the kind of specificity that transcends purely rational explanations. In this, a level of secrecy in our partaking of the sacrament of reality is presupposed. In other words, it is mystery — that which transcends our capacity for epistemological certitude — that makes revelation possible. In Chesterton's view, it is only by acknowledging the place of the human drama within the mystery of the divine drama that one is able to defend the dignity and value of human beings. It is only meaning or dignity that is conferred from the outside and understood from the inside that has authority. Self-generated meaning has no authentic authority and therefore does not genuinely uphold human dignity.

Chesterton explains that there are three classes of mysteries — what he refers to as *secrets* — that give rise to revelation (AT:65).[1] The first is a secret that is kept in order to be revealed at some point. The "whole object is not to keep the secret, but to tell it" at the opportune time (AT:65). This would be the kind of secret that is found in the plots of stories. In this case, mystery is found in playful partnership with ignorance and agnosticism. Chesterton submits that "being ignorant is the best and purest preparation for receiving the horrible revelations of the high life. Somewhat in the same way being an agnostic is the best and purest preparation for receiving the happy revelations of St. John" (AT:65).[2] Considered differently, this kind of revelation is a "novelty" that "depends on ignorance" (IL:93). Thus, Chesterton writes:

> The truth is, that all genuine appreciation rests on a certain mystery of humility and almost of darkness. The man who said, 'Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed,' put the eulogy quite inadequately and even falsely. The truth is, 'Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall be gloriously surprised.' The man who expects nothing sees redder roses than common men can see, and greener grass, and a more startling sun. Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall possess the cities and the mountains; blessed is the meek for he shall inherit the earth (HO:69).

The second kind of secret is the one that is kept because it is something already known to everyone (AT:65). The idiomatic elephant in the room that no one wants to expose would an example of this. This kind secret exists in a paradox, since we "are asked to be silent about these things, but we are not asked to be ignorant about them" (AT:66). In this instance, the most common thing to humanity is frequently also "most veiled by humanity" (AT:66). The third kind of secret is the one that is kept because it is too mysterious, delicate or vague to be explained at all. This kind of secret, like the mysteries of God discussed in the previous chapter, suggests something "too good to be told" (IJ:xxii). Here, ignorance is not bliss, but a kind of holy terror. Chesterton suggests that even the commonplace decision to go on a country walk is an example of this kind of secret (AT:67). In all of the above, he points to an irreducibility that is present in the tension between mystery and revelation. Even when something is existentially familiar, it may remain epistemologically fuzzy. Even if it is real, it may not necessarily be explicable in language. This allows for a constant return and remembering of that which has been experienced and understood in order to resist converting

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[1] These three classes of secrets correlate fairly well, although not exactly, with what McKee (1999:349) calls the "three possible ways to connect the audience to a story: *Mystery, Suspense,* and *Dramatic irony.*" With mystery, the audience knows less than the characters in the story. With suspense, the audience and the characters in the story have the same amount of information, leaving the sense that some kind of new revelation is on its way. And with dramatic irony, the audience knows more than the characters, and yet there is no way for the audience to inform the characters of the revelation they are about to receive. It is through these gaps in knowledge that a story is propelled forward into surprise (McKee 1999:355).

[2] Chesterton suggests that "we Catholics are all agnostics" (BC:62). As is his custom, he is not polarising belief and uncertainty of belief here, since he is usually very critical of agnosticism, but rather arguing that faith (Catholicism, in this case) and ignorance (agnosticism) need to be kept in tension with each other. Once again, faith and reason are not at odds, but partners in the same dance.

the perceived picture into a pattern of over-automisation. Chesterton's own writing reflects this in the way that he constantly revisits and revises subjects that he has already covered in some detail.

This revision is not undertaken to merely correct mistaken interpretations, although this may be a helpful byproduct of such revision, but rather to explore new ways of seeing the same thing. Chesterton writes that "[i]f you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it a thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time" (SW:13). He also notices that even in repetition, there is a kind of wildness (AD:7). For example, repeating the word *dog* thirty times turns it into "a word like 'snark' or 'pobble.' It does not become tame, it becomes wild, by repetition. In the end the dog walks about as startling and undecipherable as Leviathan or Croquemitaine" (AD:7). Chesterton is not interested in the sort of revision that shrinks reality into what is only a construct of a mind, as if thought were able to operate apart from the world that forms and informs it. He is interested in the kind of ocular athleticism that would allow people to see that they are part of a much larger, more startling story than they may have first imagined. Again, he wants the reader to position himself within a larger framework of Being.

As in the example of Chesterton's remarks on the story of the Tower of Babel mentioned earlier, mystery is ultimately understood via the concrete reality available in the text. In this, we see one reason for McLuhan's (1939:455) reference to Chesterton as a "practical mystic". Nevertheless, in Chesterton's view, the pursuit of interpretive understanding is not concerned with adhering to rigid prescriptivism either on the side of literalism[3] or on the side of anti-literalism. Even while there may be no definitive interpretation, there may still be better or worse interpretations. These interpretations always operate in tension between what is remembered and what is forgotten, always acutely tied to Chesterton's analogical view of language.

When it comes to interpreting *The tree of life* through Chesterton's dramatology, it is important to acknowledge that the entire narrative of the film is built upon a memory, that is Jack O'Brien's remembrance of his childhood. The exposition of the film covered in the previous chapter points to the fact that for the greater part of his life Jack has followed the way of nature in a dog-eat-dog world. However, having recovered a sense of the mysteriousness of life, Jack finds himself drawn more strongly to the way of grace that was embodied by his mother and his one brother. With this newfound revelation of grace, Jack revisits memories of his childhood, including those memories of

[3] Chesterton writes, for instance, that "[r]outine and literalism and a certain dry-throated earnestness and mental thirst, there are the very atmosphere of morbidity" (AM:23). Routine and literalism oppose Chesterton's love for analogy and his insistence that reality should be viewed more as a picture than as a pattern.

the darker times in his childhood, not to change or distort what he remembers, but to revise the way that he had always understood it. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the way that Jack remembers his childhood, as well as the way that mystery makes room for revelation. As becomes clear below, a Chestertonian search for revelation is founded particularly upon his concern for the limitations of things. In his view, it is only within limitations that stories can work and characters can change. In other words, it is only by means of limitations that an experience of revolution and transcendence becomes possible.

6.2 Finding revelation in *The tree of life*

The creation sequence in *The tree of life,* which was discussed in the previous chapter, builds up to the birth of Jack O'Brien. The climax of this long story of the universe is found in the arrival of this "living soul" (Malick 2007:19). For Malick (2007:19), who affirms human dignity in much the same way that Chesterton does, the soul is "the crown apex of creation: the self, the center and inside of nature". The self is not particularly great "in space and time" but it is great "in capacity, in depth and power of apprehension" (Malick 2007:19). The human being enters the world as a spectator, an audience witnessing the spectacular drama of creation.

Figure 18. Jack's infancy.

A sequence that shows Jack as an infant underscores this: we see Mr. O'Brien utterly dumbfounded at the miracle of life that he holds in his arms; Mrs. O'Brien reaches out in affection for her newborn

son; the infant Jack watches transfixed as a refracted light plays on his bedroom wall; we see him baptised and blessed by a priest in a Catholic church; he plays with a colourful plastic ball, crawls, learns how to walk and run, joyfully shakes a rattle as his mother dances in the front yard; he runs after bubbles that "drift anywhere at any instant" (WW:45), and also 'helps' his father plant a tree in the front yard (Figure 18).[4]

These idyllic scenes are intercut with various disruptions: Mrs. O'Brien tries to shield Jack from seeing how a man has fallen down and had a seizure; Jack gets a cut on his foot and soon thereafter discovers that he cannot always get what he wants. This interplay of gravity and levity shows that this life comprises both hospitality and hostility. Throughout the film, life is shown as a complex tapestry of pleasure and pain, such as in one scene later on in the narrative, when the fun of children playing in a communal swimming pool is interrupted when Jack's one friend drowns. In the following scene, the O'Brien boys attend the funeral of the boy, but afterwards find themselves rolling and playing on the lawn outside the chapel without thinking it strange to do so. A similar tension between pleasure and pain is found in another scene that shows children joyfully playing in DDT spray. Here, their ignorance allows them to revel in something that is actually harmful. Another scene has Jack playing with a friend who has suffered severe burn wounds. This sparks a memory in Jack of his friend's house being consumed by fire. Still, the childlike qualities of innocence and earnestness are emphasised throughout the narrative of the film. This is not to intimate that children and childhood are perfect, but to stress that the lens that Malick wants us to look through — similar to the lens that Chesterton uses — is a lens that finds more redemption than degeneration in things.

The two things that Chesterton finds in children that draws grown up people towards them are found in this sequence of moments: seriousness and delight (DE:91). He writes that

> [t]he most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not [just] mysticism, but a transcendent common-sense. The fascination of children lies in this: that with each of them all things are remade, and the universe is put again upon its trial. As we walk the streets and see below us those delightful bulbous heads, three times too big for the body, which mark these human mushrooms, we ought always primarily to remember that within every one of these heads there is a new universe, as new as it was on the seventh day of creation. In each of those orbs there is a new system of stars, new grass, new cities, a new sea (DE:91).

[4] Chesterton refers to the image of bubbles floating to highlight the importance of being connected to other people. Conversation is only possible because of the way that we are able to be connected to others (WW:45).

What Malick calls our "capacity... of apprehension" and what Chesterton calls "astonishment at the universe" is pinpointed by a scene in which we see the toddler Jack test the boundary line between the front yard of the O'Brien's home and the front yard of their neighbours. It is very clear to the small boy that the line between the two properties is imaginary. "[H]e cannot tell" where "the vacant lot leaves off and the Stickley's yard begins ... and [he] does not care" (Malick 2007:25). He seems more preoccupied with the sheer wonder of being able to use his legs to run. The world that boyhood reveals is "a pleasant surprise" (HO:258) (Figure 19).

Figure 19. The surprise of boyhood.

Chesterton explains that a riddle that impressed him at an early age was the question of what the first frog said. The "answer was, 'Lord, how you made me jump!'" (HO:258). It is this very same wonder that is found in this scene and in the montage that follows scenes of Jack's infancy, where we find the young Jack and his two brothers caught up in the sheer wonder of being alive. Their way of valuing every breath and movement is not detached and philosophical, but profoundly incarnate: they simply breathe, interact, move and observe. They are firmly attached to the significance of the present moment and to their presence to each other without necessarily being able to comprehend the depth or even properly articulate of the miracle of being (Figure 20).

Chesterton argues that childhood is a romance because it is rooted in imagination — the capacity to live into possibility (ID:250). He suggests that the imagination of childhood is not just a dream: "I remember it rather as a man dreaming might remember the world where he was awake" (ID:251). He argues that transcending the "cloud of mere custom" requires the recovery of "the candour and wonder of the child; the unspoilt realism and objectivity of innocence" (EM:14). Innocence allows

for a kind of objectivity — one that is still subjectively interpreted (See Chapter Two) — because it approaches reality without pretext. Innocence is the mark of the wildest imagination precisely because it has the ability to see what is there (EM:14). Therefore, it may again be emphasised that Chesterton calls for an imaginative engagement with the world, but not in the sense that the imagination should be divorced from reality. Rather, imagination is that which is more deeply connected to what is there. It is concerned less with limiting meanings than it is with discovering an excess of meanings.

Figure 20. The miracle of being.

In the wakefulness and awareness of childhood, moral tales are loved and appreciated, because they put "imaginary limits" into place (ID:251). They are not primarily concerned with the infinite, but with the finite. This is precisely the "charm of Robinson Crusoe" (ID:252):

> [It] is not in the fact that he could find his way to a remote island, but in the fact that he could not find any way of getting away from it. It is that fact which gives an intensive interest and excitement to all the things that he had with him on the island; the axe and the parrot and the guns and the little hoard of grain. The tale of *Treasure Island* is not the record of a vague desire to go on a sea voyage for one's health. It ends where it began; and it began with Stevenson drawing a map of the island, with all its bays and capes cut out as clearly as fretwork (ID:252).

Similarly, what makes Noah's ark so appealing to the child is the fact that it presents a world of "compactness and isolation; of creatures so comically remote and fantastic being all locked up in one box" (ID:252). Self-limitation is one of life's secret joys. The same kind of moral limitations are found in the drama of the world as in the cosmic clash of good and evil intimated by Chesterton's and Malick's references to *Job*. It is this world of moral limitations that the O'Brien boys need to confront and navigate as they live within the finite world of a small, conservative Texan town in 1956.

The limitations that Chesterton is concerned with affect all aspects of existence. With regard to plot, Chesterton observes what he calls the "materialistic error" when it comes to enjoying stories. Our "interest in plot," he suggests, is not merely "mechanical" but "moral" (IU:515). Instead of being merely an issue of structure, plot is founded on subjectively apprehended events and not on measly, impersonal accidents. Additionally, he argues that "art is never unmoral, though it is sometimes immoral; that is, moral about the wrong morality" (IU:515). The thrill of story as one art form lies in its ability to reveal something about conscience and will that was not known before; it "involves finding out that men are worse or better than they seem, and that by their own choice" (IU:515). There is no such thing as a story that is merely a morality tale; rather, all stories are sustained and propelled by moral tensions of both personal and cosmic proportions. This point is stressed in Chesterton's proclamation that there are "two primary things in the universe, before all letters and all language": "a note of exclamation and a note of interrogation" (MO:89); put differently, there is a note of affirmation and a note of negation; a note of admiration and a note of a antagonism:

> The very shapes of them are startlingly symbolic; the first straight and simple, the second crooked and looking like a sneer. The note of admiration is Man, erect and wondering, worshipping the wonderful sky. The note of interrogation is the only thinking thing that was with him in Eden from the first. The note of interrogation is the Serpent, curved and at once cowering and insinuating. The first appreciates; the second depreciates. The two have been allegorized and repeated in every bewildering blazon of mythology and heraldry. St. George was the note of admiration; he was Adam in armour. The dragon was the note of interrogation gorgeously engraved, like a capital in a Gothic missal. They have come together in many ages with the sound of steel, the straight swords of simplicity and the curved scimitars of skepticism; nor has there been any other battle since the beginning of the world (MO:89).

I believe that all of Chesterton's stories work under this assumption of there being a mysterious, cosmic moral battle beneath the dramas that he writes about — a war between good and evil that is evident in all interpersonal and political conflicts. Although many examples of the moral purpose of plot as a sequence of revelatory events may be pointed out in Chesterton's work, one example may be highlighted here in the form of the unfolding story of the character of Innocent Smith in *Manalive* (1912). At the start of the novel, Smith is accused of a number of crimes: burglary, the damage of private property, attempted murder and adultery, all of which he seems to be indisputably guilty of despite his humble, childlike demeanour. However, as the story unfolds, Smith is shown to be truly innocent of all the above crimes in that the property he damages and burgles is his own, and his crime of adultery is committed with his own wife who has been wearing different wigs to impersonate other lovers. Even what appeared to have been an attempted murder turns out to be the result of his deliberate aim to miss, for Innocent Smith is a "specially good shot" who willfully misses four or five times at very close range (MA:64). Even Smith's apparent violence is reflective of a nonviolent love

for peace, but not for boredom and complacency. These strange non-crimes are all concrete illustrations of defamiliarisation, since they are committed so that Smith is able to "receive his own life back in the present" (Milbank 2009a:122). He distances himself from his life in order to return to a state of authentic innocence, free from any cloud of sleep so that he may be allowed to enjoy the gifts and revelations that fill his life. The innocence of Innocent Smith is very much the innocence of the O'Brien boys. They are able to live in wonder and astonishment at the gift of life.

The discovery of Smith's innocence confirms Chesterton's assertion that there is a thrill in discovering the true moral standing of the characters in the story (IU:515). Furthermore, the climax of the story presents the notion that the kind of moral purpose that underpins storytelling is more than an issue of mere "custom" (MA:123). It is more than an issue of blind prejudice or vain repetitions. Instead, moral purpose is fundamentally rooted in the notion of a "creed" (MA:123); it is something willfully and willingly accepted. Smith is able to distinguish between "custom and creed," thereby allowing himself to break with conventions without breaking the commandments (MA:123). Indeed, Chesterton suggests that he is able to do this precisely because he keeps the commandments:

> It is just because he does not want to kill but to excite to life that a pistol is still as exciting to him as it is to a schoolboy. It is just because he does not want to steal, because he does not covet his neighbour's goods, that he has captured the trick (oh, how we all long for it!), the trick of coveting his own goods. It is just because he does not want to commit adultery that he achieves the romance of sex; it is just because he loves one wife that he has a hundred honeymoons. If he had really murdered a man, if he had really deserted a woman, he would not be able to feel that a pistol or a love-letter was like a song — at least, not a comic song (MA:123).

For Chesterton, it is the absence of limitations — of constraints and commandments that bring about a paradox between custom and creed— that encourages boredom. In *The tree of life,* the young Jack also has to navigate this tension between custom and creed with his father embodying the former and his mother, the latter. This is shown particularly in the scene that follows the fun of the three boys playing happily together in open fields and suburban streets. As the sun goes down and darkness descends, the boys enter the safety of their home. Chesterton is almost too idealistic about the home when he writes that he "never doubted that the human beings inside [their] houses were themselves almost miraculous ... For [him], those brown brick boxes were really Christmas boxes" containing nothing but pure gift (AU:137). This ideal, like the playful mood of the preceding scene, is contradicted by the stilted conversation that takes place around the dinner table as the O'Briens sit down to eat (Figure 21).

Figure 21. The O'Briens sit down to eat.

Mr. O'Brien, too rigid in his observance of protocol and in his desire to be perceived as being in control, is not a natural communicator. In this scene, as in most of what follows, he is almost puritanical in his dogmatism. He pursues "health" to such a degree that he becomes "unhealthy" (HO:280). Beneath his hard exterior, he wants the best for his boys, but he does not have the ability to convey this sentiment to them. Being a man of rules, he is more concerned with living within the competitive bounds of nature than with living in close fellowship with his family. Mrs. O'Brien tries to smooth the rough edges of her husband to allow her sons to see grace even in his way of nature, but her efforts fail. It is clear that while the boundary line between the O'Brien's house and the property of their neighbours may have been illusory and even avoidable, the boundary line set around the interactions of this family is inescapable.

Chesterton, ever the defender of limitations, strongly encourages his reader to consider the purpose of a fence before absent-mindedly tearing it down. One ought to know, in historical terms, why a boundary has been established before one insists on destroying its social function (ID:173). In particular, Chesterton addresses the way that the family is sometimes attacked as an archaic and outdated institution. The modernist obsession with progress prevents a deeper engagement with the value of historicity. Chesterton notices that when people do attack the family, it is "not because they can see through it, but because they cannot see it at all" (ID:174). As one example of such an attack on the family, Samuel Butler (1835-1902) (2006:15) writes that "more unhappiness comes from this source than from any other — [that is] from the attempt to prolong family connection unduly and to make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so". In this particular instance, Butler absolutises happiness and a very idiosyncratic understanding of what is 'natural' over

genuine human connection. It is precisely this sort of reasoning that Chesterton critiques when he says that such thinking seems to have been founded largely on an "individual irritation" that "varies with the individual" (ID:175). It may be true that a family is made up of imperfect individuals, but this fact is obviously not a good enough reason to attack the family, especially since no group of individuals is perfect. In any case, alternatives to the institution of the family seem less than desirable in Chesterton's opinion. He asks what would compel anyone to look after and put up with anyone in a society that has abolished the family and finds that that every answer is insufficient. In the end, he decides that the institution of the family is a fence that should stay up.

For Chesterton, this fence is both relational and spatial. Regarding the former, the family as an "omnipresent" institution asserts the importance of commitment. The family affirms that love is not just a feeling that ebbs, flows and dissolves, but a decision to honour and respect one another, even if only by compulsion of duty. Any notion of "free love" makes love seem like "an episode like lighting a cigarette, or whistling a tune" (WW:43). Love cannot be the same as preference or whim. Chesterton insists that the family is a "prolonged system of co-operation" that when treated as such is truly educational (WW:43). He notes that it is only within the bounds of the home that life is not merely made up of "the fragmentary experiences of the office or the shop of the bureau" but is felt to have the "character of unity and universality" (in Ahlquist 2006:148). The home is the primary, true school of life. Chesterton sees education as a kind of creative, paradoxical "violence" that "[interferes] with life and growth" in order to facilitate life and growth (WW:142). But education should always aim to ensure freedom and personal responsibility rather than the removal of those same things. It is better to be "flogged, and [even] unjustly flogged" than to "have [the] adventure story [of the child] taken away" (WW:145). For Chesterton, education is not the same as indoctrination. It is a vital and necessary part of bringing about an awareness of the very nature of the adventure of life. Education may even be more concerned with unlearning than with learning; it is easily more about challenging one's own perceptions than about reinforcing them.

Then, regarding the spatial nature of the metaphor of the fence, Chesterton points to an observable fact: the family occupies physical space. This again emphasises the need for limitations, for it is within the limitations of property that man is able to be an artist:

> The average man cannot cut clay into the shape of a man; but he can cut the earth into the shape of a garden; and though he arranges it with red geraniums and blue potatoes in alternate straight lines, he is still an artist; because he has chosen. The average man cannot paint the sunset whose colors be admires; but he can paint his own house with what color he chooses, and though he paints it pea green with pink spots, he is still an artist; because that is his choice. Property is merely the art of the democracy. It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven. But because he is not God, but

> only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small (WW:42).

In many ways, including more than a few references to maintaining a garden, *The tree of life* manages to affirm the importance of the microcosm that is the family. It does not do this by painting an impossible picture, but by pointing to the nature of commitment and the value of stability. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien do not have the perfect marriage, as is shown by frequent miscommunications and clashes between them, but they recognise the need for their devotion to each other and to their boys nonetheless. Jack and his brothers do not always avoid conflict with each other or with their parents, but they do at least strive to overcome any conflicts that do arise. This is not to say that their home is only tame and sedate. Chesterton recognises that order, especially of a moral kind, is the only way to produce adventure. The home is the only place where anarchy is welcome; it is "the only spot on earth where a man can alter arrangements suddenly, make an experiment or indulge a whim" (WW:48). It is within limitations that wildness finds room to breathe. This ties in with Chesterton's love for moral limitations. Without the moral interest in plot, there is no story, only "chaos," the result of which is an absence of choice, repentance and hope, and thus also the absence of any reason to fight (EM:235; WW:154). Without choice there can be coincidence, but no revelation (IU:170-172). Chesterton suggests that "[c]haos is dull; because in chaos a train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street, or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic trick is this, that he does say Victoria, and lo! it is Victoria" (MW:5).

Moral interest implies specificity and order, both of which are crucial to understanding Chesterton's dramatic worldview (Schall 2000:136). For him, life is not merely constituted of serendipitous or fluky progressions and evolutions, but something experienced as being deliberate (HO:264). Even coincidences are experienced as being important against the backdrop of our limitations. In fact, Chesterton levels some of his harshest critiques against the ideas of evolution and progress, because of the negation of decisiveness and freedom that these ideas presuppose. As argued in the previous chapter, Chesterton is not against evolution *per se*, but rather the way that it is used to negate the idea of design on the basis of an interpretive prejudice. One example of this can be found in a particular narrative turn at the start of *The ball and the cross*. Chesterton begins this novel by describing how the flying ship, piloted by its inventor and maker Professor Lucifer, sails through the skies "like a silver arrow; the bleak white steel of it, gleaming in the bleak blue emptiness of the evening" (BC:1). The ship and its contents are described as having that "fantastic and distorted look which belongs to the miracles of science" because "the world of science and evolution is far more nameless, elusive and like a dream than the world of poetry and religion; In the latter, images and

ideas remain themselves eternally, while it is the whole idea of evolution that identities melt into each other as they do in a nightmare" (BC:1).

The other passenger of the flying ship is a white-haired monk named Michael, who is in conversation with Lucifer, or is, rather, listening to his incessant, careless ramblings (BC:2). Lucifer is occupied in a long process of composing a confusing and implausible theory of how he believes religious people see and interpret the sky. He does this in much the same way as a plumber would if he were to attempt to explain an interstellar cloud to an astronomer. Michael suddenly interrupts his nebulous babble to warn him that despite his admirable rhetoric his flying ship is about to "run into something" which turns out to be St. Paul's Cathedral in London (BC:3-4). The lofty argument of the scientist is disturbed by the revelation of the building, and the "curious shape" of the cross on top of it, in front of him (BC:4). The irony is clear: in Chesterton's opinion it is the scientist or empiricist whose world is entirely mystical, and it is the religious or spiritual man who is most aware of the concrete reality before his eyes. This is the paradox of the absolutisation of a particular materialist mindset: instead of the world becoming more solid, it becomes more numinous (HO:222). Put differently, instead of becoming more concrete and objective, it becomes more subjective and solipsistic.

Chesterton pinpoints the theoretical as opposed to scientific nature of evolutionary theory in order to expose the inhuman core of the notion of the "survival of the fittest" that underpins the popular philosophies of social Darwinism and eugenics (Clark 2009:126).[5] These inhuman philosophies legitimise evil in their unspoken pronouncement that justice does not matter (Clark 2009:127). To be clear, it is not science that Chesterton opposes, but rather scientism as excessive faith in the ability of science to solve problems that move beyond its own disciplinary constraints. Indeed, he does much to expose the unempirical base of the empiricist not to dismiss the value of empiricism, but to deconstruct the idolisation of empiricism. He is especially concerned about the way that scientists rather undemocratically seek to impose their aristocratic constructs on the private domain of the family. It is unmistakable that his frequent references to such a debate are not even hinted at in *The tree of life*, but even this tells us something: *The tree of life* manages to affirm human dignity in so many ways by keeping its eyes firmly fixed on the importance of the family even amidst various social, political and scientific complications. It confirms the fact that the human story participates in empirical realities without insisting that it ought to be situated merely as one part of a scientific

[5]On social Darwinism, Chesterton writes, "If I am merely to float or fade or evolve, it may be towards something anarchic; but if I am to riot, it must be for something respectable. This is the whole weakness of certain schools of progress and moral evolution. They suggest that there has been a slow movement towards morality, with an imperceptible ethical change in every year or at every instant. There is only one great disadvantage in this theory. It talks of a slow movement towards justice; but it does not permit a swift movement" (HO:312).

process. Chesterton writes that "[m]an has lost his way" too often by getting caught up in "the pressure of certain upper-class philosophies" (WW:53). This only acts to emphasise the fact that "[m]an has always been looking for [a] home" (WW:53).

The very concrete, humble reality of the family that is represented in *The tree of life* offers an unintentional, indirect critique on the more misty ideas of evolutionary theory. Chesterton's own critique of evolutionary theory may be taken together with his critique of the modernist cult or myth of progress, since he views the two as being symptoms of the same egotistical impulse, and both are locked into a logic that is "highly vague" (OR:154-155). Progress is the worship of hubris and "worldly wisdom" and as such is destined to fail (HO:45). Even Mr. O'Brien's constant attempts to rise above the domestic status of others and his failure to achieve great success in his career are enough to demonstrate the verity of this. He wants to be an aristocrat and therefore misses the value of his own family. The problem in his outlook on the world is that he does not notice that "progress" has supplanted the possibility of "discussing what is good" (HO:51). Chesterton emphasises the fact that degradation in the material world is primarily symbolic of a problem of the soul (HO:322). What is required, therefore, is a revolution of the heart. Chesterton disagrees with those who blame poor moral standing on the environment, because it merely supports the egotism of those who have had the benefit of living in the upper classes: "Only the Christian church can offer any rational objection to a complete confidence in the rich. For she has maintained from the beginning that the danger was not in man's environment, but in man" (HO:322-323). Consequently, he argues that

> for the whole modern world is absolutely based on the assumption, not that the rich are necessary (which is tenable), but that the rich are trustworthy, which (for a Christian) is not tenable. You will hear everlastingly, in all discussions about newspapers, companies, aristocracies, or party politics, this argument that the rich man cannot be bribed. The fact is, of course, that the rich man is bribed; he has been bribed already. This is why he is a rich man. The whole case for Christianity is that a man who is dependant upon the luxuries of this life is a corrupt man, spiritually corrupt, politically corrupt, financially corrupt. There is one thing that Christ and all the saints have said with a sort of savage monotony. They have said simply that to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck (HO:322).

This neglect of a moral aim points to Chesterton's central problem with myth progress, namely that it "maintains that we alter the test instead trying to pass the test" (OR:14). He observes,

> We often hear it said, for instance, 'What is right in one age is wrong in another.' This is quite reasonable, if it means that there is some fixed aim and that certain methods attain at certain times and not at other times. If women, say, desire to be elegant, it may be that they are improved at one time by growing fatter and at another time by growing thinner. But you cannot say that they are improved by ceasing to wish to be elegant and beginning to wish to be oblong. If the standard changes, how can there be improvement, which implies a standard? (OR:14).

Revelation, as the breaking in of an unexpected voice or meaning, also requires a standard; without a standard it is impossible. Schall (2000:221) contends that this is one of the primary reasons for Chesterton's anti-modernism: the modernist's "philosophy prevented him from even considering the revelation's possibility". In dramatic terms, expectations need to be in place in order to be confirmed or disrupted, for revelation requires both continuity and discontinuity (Schindler 2004:587, 589). In *The tree of life,* this relationship between a standard and the advent of surprise is demonstrated in a few ways, but I want to especially highlight one scene in which Mr. O'Brien is talking to the boy Jack about following his dreams. He explains that he had dreamed of becoming a great musician, but had been distracted. His dream faded because he had not kept to his goal. On one level, this scene points to the fact that Mr. O'Brien, constantly caught up in legal battles over patents and his aspirations for greater wealth and success in business, had placed more misty notions of progress above the clear goal of working at his music. But on another level, this honesty about his missed opportunity opens Jack up to something in his father's character that he had not noticed before. This scene acts to inform an expectation within the young Jack. He later watches, both awed and perplexed, as his father plays the church organ (Figure 22). Here, he notices his father's vulnerability for the first time. Beneath that mask of certitude and confidence is a fragile human being who has lost his dream. This realisation speaks powerfully even though it is soon eclipsed by various internal and external tensions that arise in the narrative.

Figure 22. Jack watches his father play the church organ.

Chesterton is content with the possibility that the way that ideals are interpreted may change, but he emphasises the need for some kind of constant. He insists that it is impossible to be progressive "without being doctrinal" (HO:53). Elsewhere, he writes:

> Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to suit the vision. Progress does mean (just now) that we are always changing the vision. It should mean that we are slow but sure in bringing justice and mercy among men: it does mean that we are very swift in doubting the desirability of justice and mercy ... Progress should mean that we are always walking towards the New Jerusalem. It does mean that the New Jerusalem is always walking away from us. We are not altering the real to suit the ideal. We are altering the ideal: it is easier (HO:310).

Chesterton then moves to use the "silly example" of a man who wishes to paint the world blue (HO:311). To achieve this end, he would set about transforming the world to fit his weird ideal with his paintbrush and myriad cans of blue paint. No matter how strange and unlikely this end might seem, it is rational and sane. But Chesterton argues that the "average modern thinker" has a formidable predicament on his hands: he alters the ideal almost daily. First he wants a blue world, then a maroon one, and then a vermillion or plaid one. This analogy indicates that as "long as the vision of heaven is always changing, the vision of earth will be exactly the same" (HO:12). No ideal will remain long enough to be realised, or even partly realised. The "modern young man will never change his environment; for he will always be changing his mind" (HO:12). Chesterton observes that some "fall back simply on the clock: they talk as if the mere passage through time brought some superiority" resulting in the equating of fashion or mere newness with the good (OR:155). In *Heretics,* Chesterton uses a parable to demonstrate the potential consequence of missing the problematics of the pseudo-ideal of this myth of progress:

> Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamp-post, which many influential persons desire to pull down. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, "Let us first of all consider, my brethren, the value of Light. If Light be in itself good —" At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamp-post, the lamp-post is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediaeval practicality.[6] But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamp-post down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamp-post, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, to-day, to-morrow, or the next day, there

[6] It is possible that this pulling down of the lamp-post is a reference to the letter to the church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation (2.5) in which the church is admonished to turn back to God and do the works that they did at first lest God remove the lamp stand from its place. This speculation comes from the mention of the fact that the lamp stand is taken away, but this is not the only time a lamp stand is used as a symbol in the Bible. See, for example, Exodus 25.31-35, 26.35, 30.27, 31.8, 35.14, 37.17-20, 39.37, 40.4, 40.24, Leviticus 24.4; Numbers 3.31, 4.9, 8.2-4, 1 Kings 7.49,1 Chronicles 28.15, 2 Chronicles 4.7, 4.20, 13.11, Jeremiah 52.19; Daniel 5.5, Zechariah 4.2-11, and Hebrews 9.2. This allusion indicates that by choosing to avoid the light, it is not so much God who removes the lamp stand but rather those who choose against him. The implication, both in Chesterton's parable and in the book of Revelation, is that it is human beings who, in ignorance or arrogance, choose to reject the divine invitation. However, apart from this speculation, Chesterton's story demonstrates that progress is simply a metaphor that describes a movement towards something else; on its own it may be as aimless and mindless as a journey without a predetermined destination or faith without an object. Without any definite purpose or *telos* it cannot produce any revelation as to what the journey is for or what the traveler is moving towards. Ironically, as in Chesterton's parable, progress without the light of revelation cannot produce any real progress.

> comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark (HO:46).

This parable recalls Nietzsche's (2001:120) parable of the maniac, who runs throughout the streets proclaiming the death of God. In the frenzy of proclaiming the death of the source of *telos*, the maniac hurls his lantern to the ground, shattering it and leaving his listeners to consider his message in the dark. The removal of a transcendent point of attention leads to the removal of an immanent sense of meaning and understanding. For Chesterton, this *telos* is almost identitical to the Person of God and not just, as in Nietzsche's anti-theology, with the idea of 'God' (ST:161). By implication, true progress, for Chesterton, is only achieved through personal contact with the sacred reality of God.

The tree of life constantly shows how light breaks the pattern of the darkness, perhaps as an indication of the availability of goodness, beauty and truth even in difficult times, and even amidst mysteries (Figure 23). It is a simple and perhaps even simplistic metaphor, but it is significant nonetheless. Even the faintest glimmers of light are sufficient for the task of overcoming the darkness. Here, light, which always finds a way to triumph in the end, is symbolic of revelation. And while Chesterton does not say so explicitly in the parable above, he alludes to the idea that light is never quite absent. Rather, it is always somehow at hand even if it is only accessible as an ideal. It is still possible to discuss the philosophy of light in the absence of light, because light remains something desirable.

Figure 23. The philosophy of light.

Chesterton notices that in Genesis, the creation of light takes place before the creation of "luminous bodies" (ID:126). As absurd as such a sequence may seem, he contends that it is "rather Platonic" in that it suggests that "[t]he idea existed before any of the machinery which made manifest the idea. Justice existed when there was no need of judgment, and mercy existed before any man was oppressed" (ID:127). This is precisely the logic of creation, which contends that one can know "the atmosphere" of something before the thing itself is present (ID:127). One can know laughter before the joke has been told, or tears before the tragedy has unfolded; one can know what one wishes to create before creating it. All ethics needs "vivid pictures of purity and spiritual triumph" (HO:48). Every engagement with reality needs idealism (HO:49). At all times, as he does in the parable of the lamppost, Chesterton suggests that people should always be looking for the light, asking what is good instead of avoiding the good by talking about liberty, progress, success or even education (HO:51). These other things are secondary to the core issue, which is that everything depends upon one's philosophy of light.

In his parable of the lamppost, similar in its meaning to the metaphor of tearing down the fence of the family and to the way that Mr. O'Brien tore down his own desire of becoming a musician without understanding it, Chesterton hones in on the destructiveness of hastily attacking an assumption without properly examining its validity, and in so doing again emphasises the importance of a standard or a constant.[7] However, as Capon (1990:18) notes, Chesterton supports "laws of logic," like the laws that guide the progression of a story, but he argues that there are "no laws of likelihood". Chesterton argues that it is an error to create a law on the assumption that one can marry two incomprehensible things to create something comprehensible (HO:255). A law, he writes, "implies that we know the nature of the generalisation and enactment; not merely that we have noticed some of the effects" (HO:255). However, in most cases, the processes involved between ideas is far more complex and nuanced than a law can account for:

> When we are asked why eggs turn to birds or fruits fall in autumn, we must answer exactly as the fairy godmother would answer if Cinderella asked her why mice turned to horses or her clothes fell from her at twelve o'clock. We must answer that it is *magic*. It is not a 'law,' for we do not understand its general formula. It is not a necessity, for though we can count on it happening practically, we have no right to say that it must always happen. It is no argument for unalterable law ... that we count on the ordinary course of things. We do not count on it; we bet on it. We risk the remote possibility of a miracle as we do that of a poisoned pancake or a world-destroying comet. We leave it out of account, not because it is a miracle, and therefore an impossibility, but because it is a miracle, and therefore an exception. All the terms used in the science books, 'law,' 'necessity,' 'order,' 'tendency,' and so on,

[7] That Chesterton is aware of the problem of haste is aligned with Gadamer's (2004:280) argument that one of the primary causes of misunderstanding is "overhastiness". Overhastiness is a descriptor of any attitude that favours the new and also solidifies judgments before the authority of those judgments can be challenged (Gadamer 2004:279). Gadamer's critique of overhastiness is therefore similar, in some ways, to Chesterton's critique of the modernist doctrine of progess.

> are really unintellectual, because they assume an inner synthesis, which we do not possess. The only words that ever satisfied me as describing Nature are the terms used in fairy books, 'charm,' 'spell,' 'enchantment,' They express the arbitrariness of the fact that it is a mystery. A tree grows fruit because it is a magic tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched. The sun shines because it is bewitched (HO:256, emphasis in original).

Just as Chesterton is convinced about the importance of discussing one's philosophy of light, so he is certain of the fairytale nature of reality, which is inherently geared towards offering a story of goodness embedded in the world. To borrow Kearney's (2002:132) terminology, fairytales deal with discovery and creation; with disclosing "what is already there in the light of what is not yet (but is potentially)". Fairytales re-enact the actual as the possible. They are, therefore, a form of defamiliarisation that challenges complacent perception. The presence of Elfland in our present world is alluded to in *The tree of life* in two particular scenes, one in which we see Mrs. O'Brien floating and dancing on the breeze beneath the shelter of a tree, and another which has her sleeping like Snow White in a glass coffin in a forest (Figure 24). These two scenes are conjured in Jack's imagination as he recognises both the vulnerability and the potency of grace. In the first scene, her flight is evidence of her humility and her levity (HO:325). In the second scene, her death points to the weight and the glory of her life. Both scenes suggest that "fragility is force" (HO:325). If angels are able to fly, it is "because they can take themselves lightly" (HO:325).

Figure 24. Mrs. O'Brien in Jack's fairytale.

These fairytale pictures of Mrs. O'Brien, however, are not there to detract from the reality, but to point back to it. They are a means for demonstrating that while expectations abound, they may not necessarily be applicable to revelation. Nevertheless, one needs a light or a point of departure by which one can see what is anomalous in the drama. But Chesterton maintains that his argument against progress — as well as other scientific notions of law, necessity, order and tendency — is

precisely an argument in favor of progress (IU:314).[8] Progress is only progress when "effort" is present (IU:314; Stapleton 2009:195). Chesterton insists that "better things can grow if we take the trouble to grow them" (IU:314). This implies a readiness to accept the state of things as they are instead of falling back uncritically on a utopian "imaginary ideal" (IU:309).

Chesterton contends that a reliance on the rhetoric of laws and necessities in science undermines the intellect, and his argument proposes that the main reason for this is the fact that these laws and necessities present an "inner synthesis" that is not properly known (HO:256). Bearing in mind the corpus of Chesterton's writings, I would suggest that while he is clearly against laws that convey a sense of control to human understanding that goes against the grain of his epistemological humility, there is something else at play here, namely the fact that laws easily render the text of life dead and dissectible. This would violate Chesterton's whole philosophical project, which is to render things more profound and more alive (AU:134). As Schall (2000:222) observes, the primary problem with the modernism that Chesterton criticises is that it seeks to transcend paradoxes by resorting to featurelessness. When the paradox is kept intact, the mind is compelled to grapple and thus stay lively (ST:133). For example, it is the very paradox of nature and grace that keeps Jack from being complacent about the path that he should follow. In fact, even by the end of Jack's story, we find that the choice for one or the other is illusory: one cannot have one without the other.

While *The* tree *of life* presents a fairly hopeful view of the family, it resists what Chesterton would call optimism. After introducing the general environment of the O'Brien family in its first two acts, with its various tensions only hinted at, the film shifts towards a darker period in the childhood of Jack O'Brien. The one sequence in the film, which follows a scene in which we see Mr. O'Brien lose another patent case, is instigated by a massive conflict between Mr. O'Brien and the two people in the family — Mrs. O'Brien and RL — that embody the way of grace. The conflict begins over a lunchtime meal in the dining room when, for no apparent reason, Mr. O'Brien tells RL to speak only if he has something important to say. RL sits calmly in his seat and nods in agreement. Mr. O'Brien then continues to dominate the conversation at the table, first by conversing with his youngest son and then in his interrogation of Jack about a paperweight that he has in his possession. RL, to defend his older brother, softly speaks to his father, saying simply "Be quiet". What follows is a flurry of activity as Mr. O'Brien, enraged by what he perceives as his son's insolence, sends Jack and RL to their rooms. The tension in the home mounts as Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien later confront each other in

[8] It would be a mistake to assume that Chesterton is against the modernist presumption of the possibility of improving things, but he does ask what it means to "make things better" (HO:307). One problem with the modernist conception of time is that, in praising linearity and the mere progression forward in time, it ultimately promotes circularity: "Evolution is only good if it produces good; good is only good if it helps evolution. The elephant stands on the tortoise, and the tortoise on the elephant" (HO:307). Here, Chesterton's reference to Hindu myth is enough to suggest that he does not approve of the circular argumentation lauded by modernity.

the kitchen. Nature and grace, in this conflict, remain bound tightly together, but also simultaneously at odds (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Nature and grace at odds, yet bound together.

When the way of nature takes centre stage, everyone suffers. After this conflict, Mr. O'Brien leaves to go on a long business trip around the world. This gives rise, at first, to a riot of joy and delight as the three O'Brien boys revel in the freedom that has come from not having their domineering father present. Even their mother seems to flourish in the absence of an overbearing patriarchy (Figure 26). Soon, however, this joy turns to uncertainty and "matriarchy" turns into "moral anarchy" (EM:54). While Mr. O'Brien's regime has been oppressive, its boundaries were still needed. Even with its apparent tensions, the coherence between Jack's parents is precisely what is an indication of something good. They remain "one flesh … even when they are not one in spirit" (WW:44).

The scenes that follow, this conflict highlights the need for unity and reconciliation that Chesterton believes to be at the heart of human longing. As noted above, revelation comes out of a sense of the need for and belief in standards, but here it becomes clear that it also comes out of a sense of the ordering of such standards. As noted above, this is a revelation of a secret that is known even while it remains unarticulated (AT:66). This implies a surprise that remains concealed to a degree even when it is known and understood. It may thus be distinguished from the first kind of revelation in that it involves a continuous tension between concealment and discovery instead of describing a disruption of ignorance brought upon by the advancement of a story. In other words, ignorance remains out of the question (AT:66). However, it is precisely ignorance that remains a problem for this kind of revelation.

Figure 26. Freedom from patriarchy.

Chesterton addresses this problem in his interpretation of *Job*. As covered in the previous chapter, the book of *Job* opens with a wager between God and Satan on the exemplary devotion to God exhibited by the central protagonist (IJ:1-2). Then, after taking account of a number of severe tragedies that befall Job, the book moves to describe a number lengthy speeches given by Job and his "comforters" (IJ:3-4, 5-88). In these speeches, Job and his friends offer their best guesses as to the reasons for Job's suffering and the place of his suffering in the context of the divine plan. There is, therefore, a sense in which both Job and his friends are bringing to light things that they already know and understand. But this, of course, is precisely the trouble. Ultimately, God shows up to chastise this motley crew, asking, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" (IJ:89; Job 38.2). Chesterton finds the explanations of Job and his friends deplorable in that they seem to promote the "modern habit of saying, 'Every man has a different philosophy; this is my philosophy and it suits me'" (IJ:xvi). They have perpetuated a rigidity of mind and a plurality of subjectively determined perspectives, thereby standing directly in the way of the surprise of reality itself. Chesterton contests this pluralism on the metareferential grounds that a plurality of perspectives and perceptions does not negate the human desire to know what is actually going on (IJ:xvii). Pluralism does not negate the desire to feel that all things should be in their right place. And this desire, Chesterton intimates, is indicative of the a larger story: any "shadow of homesickness" implies that a genuine home must at least be a possibility (HO:284; WS:43).

I have already alluded above to the fact that the event of revelation is significant insofar as it is recognised as being personal (EM:104). But for Chesterton, its personal character is not the sole determinant of its significance. Its significance rests also on its ability to introduce coherence and

goodness into the human story. As already intimated, at the centre of Chesterton's dramatology is his belief in the human desire to find meaningful, moral coherence even in the face of the inexplicable. In fact, this desire for coherence seems to be at the heart of what it means to be human. I have already addressed a few of the totalising metanarratives that were prevalent in Chesterton's day, including the myths of pure rationalism, absolutism, legalism, scepticism, progress, scientism and evolution. Chesterton claims that all of these are all the wrong keys; they are false paths for navigating the human story and as such produce discontinuity, disconnection and a kind of staleness of thought that prevents wonder.

Figure 27. Mrs. O'Brien waits for Jack's return.

In *The tree of life,* the disconnection between Jack and his father alerts us to a number of similarly false stories that guide Jack's actions as he enters adolescence. His disconnection from his father is a picture of his disconnection from God. It is precisely when his disconnection from his father becomes as physical as it is emotional that he also feels disconnected from his mother, his brothers and his own sense of being at home in the world. He therefore often acts out in anger and rebellion. A few images show the antagonism he finds in himself and in his environment. He starts to navigate his own identity by spending more time with his friends. While playing in the street outside in the pale light of dusk, he sees a couple arguing in their home. Later, he and his friends act aggressively against the material world: one boy destroys an aluminium dustbin and another lights fireworks that he should not possess. The boys decide to tie a live frog to a rocket and launch to "to the moon". Jack participates in this same destructive behaviour by breaking a few windows and later by going into the house of his neighbour and stealing her sheer nightgown. Thereafter, he is visibly troubled by his own actions and sexual impulses. Confused, ashamed and annoyed, he disposes of the stolen

underwear by throwing it into a river. He runs home, tired, troubled and weeping. He is met at home by his mother, who has clearly been worrying about him (Figure 27). She does not say anything, but simply sits down with him outside by the tree in the front yard and wipes away her prodigal son's tears. Boyhood may certainly reveal a world of surprise and wonder, but Chesterton observes that it is also "a most complex and incomprehensible thing. Even when one has been through it, one does not understand what it was" (AU:62). It contains "a callousness, a carelessness, [and] a curious combination of random and quite objectless energy" (AU:62).

It seems that identity and understanding are formed in two primary ways, via two forms of conflict: through violence, both metaphorical and actual, and through dialogue (AU:63, 68). The former, explored particularly by Jack in these scenes, is the way of nature. It considers all of life through competition and the clash of dichotomies. The latter involves the same elements that are found in the way of nature and still allows for divergence, but it does not try to overcome or silence the voice of otherness. Dialogue, so fundamental to the way of grace, allows for difference where violence wants to destroy it by conquering or assimilating it. Violence blocks out revelation, whereas dialogue welcomes its possibility. The difference between dialogue and violence is determined quite simply by what is loved and therefore by what is deemed worth defending (IS:30). People easily love themselves, their own property and their own land, but find it harder to love others and what belongs to others.

Chesterton writes that it is not for the love of peace, for example, that war is avoided, but for the love of others. By referring to the relationship between England and Germany, he explains that it "would be far easier to make an Englishman love Germany than to make him love peace with Germany" (IS:24). He contends that "Germany is a loveable thing" while peace, a byproduct of love, is not (IS:24). "Germany is a positive thing; one can like its beer, admire its customs, love its children, … appreciate the beaming ceremony of its manners, and even (with brave effort), tolerate the sound of its language" (IS:24). Building on this example, we find that it is in loving otherness that genuine, empathetic dialogue is made possible. Violence and degeneration arise when the need to preserve the self and one's possessions supersedes one's love for the other. If the self is loved more than the other, war is inevitable. This is precisely the problem in the relational disconnection between Jack and his father. Both stick rigidly to protecting and defending their own views and egotisms without paying much heed to the possibility, firstly, that their own perspectives may not be absolute, and secondly, that their existences are not isolated from the larger drama of their family, as well as of humanity. Still, Chesterton's entire dramatology is founded on the idea that difference must be allowed for, but not at the expense of the self. This is why he is not a pacifist. The corollary of this, and the reason that Chesterton is also not a militarist, must also be mentioned: the self must be allowed for, but not at the expense of otherness. Ultimately, in Chesterton's view, dialogue ought to take precedence over

violence, for it is only in this creative tension — this paradox of alterities — that a revelation of human dignity can be upheld.

Until the departure of Mr. O'Brien from the story, the tension between nature and grace in Jack has been internal. Now, in Mr. O'Brien's absence, the tension becomes visible in Jack's actions and especially in his relationship with this mother. The final scene before Mr. O'Brien's returns has Jack caught in confrontation with his mother after having ruined a watercolour painting done by RL.[9] She tells him, "Come here". He yells a defiant "No!" Noticing how this affects his mother, he then says that he refuses to do what she tells him to. "I'm going to do what I want," he says. Then, almost as if invoking the spirit of his father's patriarchy, he says, "What do you know? You let him walk all over you" (Malick 2007:103) (Figure 28). Here, Jack sees grace as weakness, not strength. After this conflict, an image of Jack walking away from his home reveals him to be at odds with and, in his own mind, isolated from the world. In a scene that follows this one, we see him swimming in a rock pool with his brothers, uttering a simple prayer: "How do I get back to where [my brothers] are?" He wants to understand what it means to return to his innocence, but he cannot seem to find a way back from the turmoil he feels. He notices that the call of transcendence, so present in his play time, has been lost in the fact of this newfound seriousness (Malick 2007:101).

Figure 28. Jack ruins a picture that RL has painted for his mother.

Soon after this outburst, Mr. O'Brien returns from his business trip. While his departure seemed to incite Jack's rebellious behaviour, his return does nothing to quell it, at least at first. With the boundaries now once removed, the wildness of Jack's inner conflict has been left exposed. Mr. O'Brien tells his family about his travels; he "shows them towels and washcloths he has carried off

[9] The film does not explain why RL is creating this painting, but the screenplay explains that it is for his mother's birthday (Malick 2007:102). It seems that Jack ruins the painting because he realises that his own idea of a gift, a paperweight, is not as imaginative or as personal his brother's, "though it cost more" (Malick 2007:102). Here, in the subtext, we recognise how Jack misinterprets the nature of his mother's love. He has learned and believed a lie lived by his father, that love is something deserved and earned, rather than something freely given.

from hotels" and lies that he is "confident that [his] deal went through" (Malick 2007:80-81). In the short scenes that follow, it becomes clear to Jack "that he and his brothers remain alive through their father's sacrifice and bear their lives as an undeserved gift from him" (Malick 2007:81). Nevertheless, Jack is constantly suspicious of his father. It is difficult to trust a man so closed and demanding. Jack is always "bewildered by his father's indifference to the burdens he imposes on others; the absence of any consciousness of hypocrisy when he breaks those rules he imposes on others" (Malick 2007:82).

Later, as Jack watches his father work on the Studebaker, he wonders what would happen if he were to kick the jack out from under the car (Figure 29). Would it injure or kill his father? He no longer has the ability to fake love and admiration for his father. He prays that God would "kill him" or just "let him die" (Malick 2007:86). This prayer, dark as it is, reflects Jack's wish that he would not have to choose between his mother's way and his father's. It would be easier if the way of nature were not vying for his allegiance. At this point in the narrative, it seems that the relationship between Jack and his father is irreparable. Both characters remain equally obstinate and bad tempered. However, perhaps because of the absence of reconciliation between father and son, both characters start to become open to the necessity of the kind of self-confrontation that may make room for the possibility of dialogue.

Figure 29. Jack watches his father work on the Studebaker.

Jack cannot seem to bring himself to do what he wants to, and ends up doing what he hates. He seems to flaunt his feelings of worthlessness by living in contradiction, always wanting to do the right thing, but failing to. While out playing in the forest, Jack tells RL to put his finger over the tip of his BB gun, promising his brother that he won't shoot him. But Jack ends up firing the gun anyway,

causing RL to howl in pain (Figure 30). Jack suddenly catches a glimpse the darkness inside himself. He sees that he causes as much hurt and anguish as his father does. He is just as much of a hypocrite as his father has ever been.

Figure 30. Jack shoots RL's finger with an air gun.

Malick (2007:108) explains that "Jack is sick at heart. It could not have been he who acted in this way. Something acted on him. But no, he did it, though a strange he; not the real he". He understands that all the hatred that he has directed against his father has always, subconsciously, been self-hatred. It takes this revelation to bring a crucial turning point in Jack's character. It takes him recognising the evil inside him to open him up to the possibility of redemption. Having properly noticed his failings, he no longer needs to defend them. It is clear that the "mood of revolt will grow more and more bitter so long as we can prove we are right; we must pray for the higher talent of proving we are wrong" (IL:114).

This recognition of failings is the essence of what Chesterton calls "Christian optimism," which is obviously different from the kind of optimism discussed in the previous chapter (HO:283). It is precisely this recognition of their inhumanity that allows human beings to become more fully human. Christian optimism is "based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world" (HO:283):

> I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God. But now I really was happy, for I had learnt that man is a monstrosity. I had been right in feeling all things as odd, for I myself was at once worse and better than all things. The optimist's pleasure was prosaic, for it dwelt on the naturalness of everything; the Christian pleasure was poetic, for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything in the light of the supernatural. The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring. The knowledge found out and illuminated forgotten chambers in the dark house of infancy. In knew now why grass had always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home (HO:283-284).

In the few short scenes that follow Jack's epiphany of his own fallenness, we see him reconcile again with RL. Until now, Jack has always been reticent around his brother. He has been jealous, continuously struggling to comprehend RL's geniality (Malick 2007:86). Now, open to admitting the ways that he has veered from doing the right thing, he experiences RL's forgiveness. It is a

forgiveness that has always been there, always readily offered, but now for the first time it is readily received, not because it is deserved, but because it is needed. "I'm sorry," Jack tells his brother. RL puts his hand on his brother's head as if to offer him a blessing (Figure 31). Chesterton writes that "the point of all repentance is beginning afresh" (IL:85), and it is exactly this sort of new beginning that is captured so powerfully in this scene.

Figure 31. RL forgives and blesses Jack.

Just as Jack's egotism has been broken down, so Mr. O'Brien soon comes to realise that his own efforts to conquer the world have failed. Soon after reconciling with RL, Jack goes out to meet his father in the cabbage patch. No words pass between them, but Jack sits down to help his father tend to the garden. Then, as we watch Mr. O'Brien walk around his workplace we hear him speak: "I wanted to be loved because I was great — a big man. But I'm nothing. Look at the glory around us. Trees. Birds. I lived in shame. I dishonoured it all and didn't notice the glory. [I've been] a foolish man". He arrives home to announce to his wife that the plant at which he has been working is closing down, leaving him to choose between "no job or a transfer to a job nobody wants".

Figure 32. Nature and grace, no longer in conflict.

Jack, trembling "with a sense of wonder and discovery," hears the conversation between his parents (Malick 2007:111). For the first time in his memory, they do not seem to be in conflict, the tensions between them having been resolved (Figure 32). We see the two of them speak, but we do not hear what they are saying. The screenplay offers that Mr. O'Brien is finally admitting his failures to his wife: "I've driven my sons away from me. I thought I was making them tough so they could live in the world" (Malick 2007:112). Mrs. O'Brien offers only forgiveness. Her husband looks at her and speaks: "Thank you for loving me" (Malick 2007:112).

Figure 33. Jack reconciles with his father.

Now humbled, Mr. O'Brien comes to Jack and offers an apology: "Jack, all I ever wanted was to make you strong, [so that you could] be your own boss. Maybe I've been tough on you. I'm not proud of that". The subtext of this conversation is that Mr. O'Brien has "lost the light in [himself]" as well as "the power to give it to [his] children" (Malick 2007:113). Jack, not trying to impress his father anymore, offers that he is just "as bad" as he is, more like him than his mother (Malick 2007:113). To this, his father responds, "You boys are all I've done in life. Otherwise, I've drawn zilch. You're all I have. You're all I want to have" (Figure 33). Mr. O'Brien embraces his son, and calls him a "sweet boy". Malick (2007:115) explains that in this moment, Jack discovers that forgiveness — received first from his mother and then from RL — "has given him the key to reality. He sees it now: love is the answer to evil and sorrow. He will love every leaf and stone, every ray of light". Measured against the cosmic drama, this scene of reconciliation may seem small and insignificant, but it is clear from its emotional significance to both characters that Malick (2007:114-115) means it to symbolise a much larger reconciliation between man and God. This event — this small revelation — is enough to call Jack and his father into understanding their place in an expansive, redemptive mystery.

The fact that this conversation takes place outside in view of the tree that is in the centre of the front yard raises the question of what this tree symbolises, both in the *The tree of life* and in Chesterton's work. The tree and its context within a forest is one of the primary symbols used by him, as can be observed throughout this study. Obviously, the idea of the tree of life contains many meanings across various mythologies, but only those that directly connect the tree with Chesterton's work need to be of concern here. In the first place, it is helpful to begin by noticing Chesterton's connection of trees with genealogies: "The genealogical tree is really a most common or garden sort of tree. It is only the tree of life; a mere trifle" that reveals the "feeling of interest in one's own family" (IL:154). The tree of life is a symbol of the centrality of the family and of healthy growth. The drama of domesticity is a key to engaging in the drama of the cosmos. But, perhaps most importantly, the tree may be used to symbolise the entire narrative that informs Chesterton's dramatology.

To begin with, the genealogical tree reflects the structure of the cosmos (EM:223). It begins with a seed and grows into something grand and beautiful. To counteract the enthusiasm of the kind of "evolutionary monomania" that insists that "every great thing grows from a seed, or something smaller than itself," Chesterton notes that "every seed comes from a tree, or something larger than itself" (EM:87). In his view, the Trinitarian Godhead is the eternal family of three-in-oneness that calls all things into being. As observed throughout this study, Chesterton constantly shifts the focus of the reader to the idea that there is a much larger drama at work. His perception is therefore heliocentric rather than geocentric in the sense that the earth — mankind's story — revolves around the sun — God's story — and therefore participates in its light. Man revolves around God even when he is not aware of his participation. Just as we breathe without noticing how it nourishes us, so it is easy to overlook the fact of our dependence upon other things in a cosmic drama. Chesterton uses the symbol of a trees tumbling in the wind as being "typical of the visible world moving under the violence of the invisible" (TT:69). He always assumes that there is more than meets the eye. And this is precisely the idea that frames the narrative of *The tree of life*: no matter how much the story we are watching or living seems to dominate our perception, it is not the whole story.

The tree is also symbolic of Chesterton's epistemology in that it refers to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Chesterton is obviously supportive of the search for knowledge, wisdom and truth, but highly critical of the way that lies can supplant and get confused with truth. He appreciates the human capacity for understanding, but also acknowledges the human capacity for misunderstanding. For him, knowledge and wisdom are only accessible via the humility that recognises the drama of the

individual as being a smaller component of a larger drama. As suggested by the tree of knowledge, death comes into the world by pride and egotism; life comes into the world by humility. Humility, then, is symbolised by the tree of life. To gain life, one has to give in to one's dependence upon something else; to partake of the fruit of that tree is an admission of reliance and a call for gratitude.

In particular, the tree may be taken as a symbol of salvation for Chesterton (Elkink 2001:116). He pictures the forest of Eden as the home of humanity, a place of meeting and spiritual communion (Elkink 2001:117). It suggests a place were life is able to flourish. The tree, in the form of a ladder, points to the human desire for transcendence and a connection with the Divine, but also suggests the descent undertaken by God in the event of the Incarnation (Elkink 2001:119). In the form of the cross, the tree suggests the sacrifice made by the Incarnate God-man for the sake of humanity (EM:210). It also suggests, in tune with Malick's film, that surrender conquers, because it is the way of love. If power fails, it is because it is the way of silencing the voice of the other. In *The tree of life,* the dead wood of a tree is found in common objects that surround the characters in the story: in bedside lamps, chairs, cupboards, draws, church pews, floorboards, gates, a garden table, postboxes, shovel handles, tables, toys, window frames, and cricket bats, and even in the plank of a swing and the walls of the houses. Various musical instruments shown in the film are also made out of wood: RL's guitar, Mr. O'Brien's piano, and the church organ. The dead wood from trees — symbols of something sacrificed — is always there to support and enrich life by becoming extensions of the humanity of people.

Ultimately, the tree points to the idea that revelation is a sacrament. It is not always noticeable even when it is present. In a scene that appears in the screenplay of *The tree of life*, which is only implied in the film, while looking at the tree that stands in the front yard Mrs. O'Brien explains to Jack that the tree "doesn't care how it seems to others. It just is. It puts up with storms, rain, [and] bad weather" (Malick 2007:87). She then says that a "leaf might think it is separate and alone, but all the leaves are part of the same unfolding. They start from the same seed" (Malick 2007:87). This attempt to explain the way of grace only manages to elicit a confused response in Jack. He tells his mother that it is difficult to know what to do when what she says is so quickly contradicted by the messages that he receives from his father. Mrs. O'Brien simply responds by saying that "[e]verything will be all right" (Malick 2007:88). She is not concerned with proving her point in the way that her husband would be. Instead, her hope is that her son will simply see the difference between the ways of grace and nature so that he will be able to hold the two in tension. The true revelation, that grace is sacramentally enmeshed in and beyond the stage of the human drama, will be made clear to Jack at the right time.

Revelation is that which has always been present and yet has been easily overlooked. This idea, perhaps the most important for understanding Chesterton's view on revelation, is beautifully portrayed in Chesterton's short story *The invisible man* in which a murder occurs and the body of the victim goes missing under apparently impossible circumstances. Throughout the story the presence of the culprit James Welkin is 'felt' but somehow remains unseen. Just before receiving a letter, the central female protagonist Laura Hope tells of a strange experience: "'I heard James Welkin laugh as plainly as I hear you speak,' said the girl, steadily. 'There was nobody there, for I stood just outside the shop at the corner, and could see down both streets at once'" (FB:93). The characters that experience this 'presence' without being privy to its nature assume that there can be only two explanations, namely, that the presence is that of a ghost or spiritual energy, or that they are mad. Early on in the story, Chesterton dispels the second explanation on the somewhat simplistic grounds that it is only sane people who concede the possibility that they are mad (FB:94). This implies that the second explanation is the most likely in the opinion of the characters. Even the rationalist detective Flambeau, addressing his friend Father Brown, considers the supernatural explanation most likely: "'Father,' said Flambeau, after a pause, 'upon my soul I believe it is more in your department than mine. No friend or foe has entered the house, but Smythe [the victim] is gone, as if stolen by the fairies'" (FB:105). However, it is the priest Father Brown, who argues that this 'supernatural' explanation is equally ridiculous:

> 'Have you ever noticed this — that people never answer what you say? They answer that you mean — or what they think you mean. Suppose one lady says to another in a country house, "Is there anybody staying with you?" the lady doesn't answer "Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the parlour-maid, and so on," though the parlour-maid may be in the room, or the butler behind her chair. She says: "There is *nobody* staying with us," meaning nobody of the sort you mean (FB:106).

Father Brown argues that Laura Hope's claim to have been alone just after receiving a letter cannot be true (FB:107). It is not that she has been lying out of volition, but rather out of a lack of observation or awareness. Father Brown continues: "A person can't be quite alone in a street a second before receiving a letter. She can't be quite alone in a street when she starts reading a letter just received. There must be somebody pretty near; he must be *mentally invisible*" (FB:107, emphasis added).

From this, Father Brown pulls back the curtain to reveal what was obvious and yet unseen: the postman who delivers all the letters in the story is the criminal; he, like the truth, remains 'concealed' — again, like a leaf in a forest, hidden in plain sight — because of the prejudice that regards postmen as 'nobodies'. It is the priest — the mediator of the supernatural — who ends up providing the sane, rational explanation precisely because the priest understands the relationship between the immanent and the transcendent. This *dénouement* is common in Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories:

the plump little priest is continuously out to debunk the foolish superstitions of the characters around him. Alison Milbank (2009a:46) argues that Chesterton's Father Brown stories are

> object-lessons in the fantastic, because each begins in a credible world of service flats, tea-shops or seaside resorts out of season, but then proceeds to destabilize that comfortable sense of normality by a mysterious fact that seems inexplicable in rational terms: a dead body vanishes from a room and appears in a tree; an arrow from heaven shoots someone; a dagger flies; an automaton commits a murder; the sun kills its worshipper. The reader is faced with a seemingly supernatural incursion into the real and tries to find an explanation in which both normal context and supernatural fact can be accommodated.

It is the priest Father Brown who injects common sense into the apparent incongruity between the natural and the supernatural, into the dichotomy of nature and grace. Ironically, it is the believer in miracles who ends up demonstrating that no miracle has taken place (Milbank 2009a:47). Both Clark (2006:13) and Žižek (2009d:25) observe that Chesterton's preference is always for the "prosaic explanation". However, it is clear that Chesterton's prosaic explanations are not meant to detract from the possibility of the miraculous or the mysterious in any way, but in fact highlight the very miraculousness of the prosaic. Chesterton describes the miraculous as that which is strange, but not strange enough to completely alienate. He demystifies the spiritual in much the same way that he defamiliarises the perceptible, not to discredit or abandon the spiritual absolutely, but to demonstrate that the spiritual is in fact a welcoming presence, somehow evident in the material realm of human experience. Moreover, Chesterton demonstrates through his stories, and especially through the words and actions of Father Brown, that revelation may be present to all, but recognised by only the select few who are willing or open enough to see it. It is precisely this sentiment that is carried across in *The tree of life*, which presents an obviously ordinary life as a truly extraordinary life. It seems to me that there are those like GK Chesterton and Terrence Malick who are charged with communicating that simple, yet profound insight to others.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of chapters

I began this study by noting the sheer magnitude of Chesterton's output as well as the fact that his writings resist any kind of simple reductionism, and what was implied in these observations is that any writings on Chesterton must, almost by necessity, be incomplete. Put otherwise, one can more easily fit one's own head into the work of Chesterton than fit his work into one's head. Additionally, his work, which crosses into the territory of many genres, covers a wide range of categories: art criticism, detective fiction, economics, essays, journalism, literary criticism, novels, philosophy, plays, poetry, theology, and travel writing (Ahlquist 2006:312-314). Therefore, far from trying to cover all of his genres and subjects, the aim of this study has been to present an overview, explanation and application of his dramatology — a dramaturgical interpretive framework inferred from his work — as an approach that contributes to the general context of visual culture studies and the specific context of visual hermeneutics. To stay true to hermeneutic discourse in general, I have made no attempt to enforce any notion that this discussion is or could ever be complete. Rather, what appears in the pages of this thesis is a small contribution to an ongoing discussion, both on Chesterton's work and on visual hermeneutics and visual culture studies.

Four basic objectives were set out at the outset for the purpose of achieving the primary aim of the study. In the first place, I sought to provide a foundation to Chesterton's dramatology. To do this, I gave an overview of his philosophy via a discussion on his cosmology, epistemology and ontology in order to describe the conceptual world — the historically-affected horizon of perception — that guides Chesterton's thinking. In the second place, I sought to answer the question of what his primary dramatological task is. Here, I set out to discuss the primary goal of his interpretive process. The third objective of this study was to examine his rhetorical strategies as the elements by which he manages to present his philosophy as a unifying, but not totalising narrative. While the first two objectives address the context and the goal of Chesterton's thinking, the third objective addresses his interpretive attitude — the way in which he reads and thus a way that others may also read. The fourth and final objective was to apply knowledge gained through investigating the first three objectives of the study to the analysis of a particular visual text, namely Terrence Malick's film *The*

tree of life (2011). In the present chapter, it is my intention to highlight some of the ideas that I have covered. By doing this, I open up the way for my discussion on the contributions of this study, its limitations, as well as suggestions for further research.

Following the introduction and overview of the study in Chapter One, Part One commenced with Chapter Two, which presented the foundation of Chesterton's dramatology. This began by spotlighting the chief difficulty of engaging with Chesterton's work, specifically that it is both vast in scope and immensely rich in ideas. That said, it was noted, especially following certain recent developments in Chesterton scholarship, that it seems most appropriate to present his work as being situated within a theological framework; for, in spite of or perhaps owing to the myriad subjects he addressed, Chesterton always finds an opportunity to introduce the subject of his religion. His theological awareness is ultimately what guides and shapes his way of reading. Nevertheless, it was explained that this study does not attempt to position him within a larger theological discourse, but rather argues for the way that his theology affects his interpretive approach, as well as the way that one might understand that approach.

With this in mind, Chapter Two presented an outline of Chesterton's philosophy by addressing three aspects of his worldview — his cosmology, his epistemology and his ontology — via an exegesis of the implications of Chesterton's play *The surprise* in the light of his other writings. It was shown that these aspects, each with its own dramatic character, follow the structure of a narrative consisting of particular components: a mysterious dimension (God, divine knowledge, and the riddle of being), a revelatory, incarnate dimension (creation, human knowledge and the answer of being), an antagonistic force that disrupts the paradoxical connection between the mysterious and the revelatory (the Fall and human non-knowledge), and, finally, a drive that seeks to re-establish this paradoxical connection (re-creation, re-membering, and the romance of being). These components all point to the narrative structure that underpins Chesterton's thinking. The stories he tells affirm each of the elements of this narrative structure, always in search of recovering a clear view.

It was argued that Chesterton's cosmology is based on the idea that a particular, good, personal Creator God had written the story of the universe, but had set it free to have its own being (EM:236; HO:171, 281; MO:109). The defense of free will, then, becomes central to Chesterton's philosophy. Man is not just a victim to external forces, but a creature with agency and the power to decide. In all of this, Chesterton affirms the goodness of material existence and claims that evil is a problem of the spirit — something born out of the free will of people — more than it is a problem of materiality. He also proposes the possibility that this Creator God remains intricately and continuously involved in the processes of nature even though his original good world has been contaminated by the Fall —

that is, by the choice of mankind against the good plan of the Creator. For Chesterton, there is no higher compliment that can be paid to God than that he is a creator, making it reasonable to assume that man, as the image of God, must be one too (AU:51; EM:34). Therefore, it became clear that Chesterton sees the role of the human being as fundamentally creative. For him, "[a]rt is the signature of man;" it is the primary thing that separates man from other animals (EM:34). His dramatology may therefore also be understood primarily as a creative action; as an act of building something new and thus making a contribution to the larger drama within which it operates.

However, Chesterton does not mean this creative act to be creation *ex nihilo* or *pro nihilo,* but creation *pro bono*, for the good. He always remains committed to reconciliation, reconstruction, redemption, reform, renewal, remaking, restoration, revision and revolution (AU:324; EM:241; HO:310, 315; OS:426). Such commitments are fenced in by Chesterton's paradoxical insistence that "we must be fond of this world, even in order to change it" and that "we must be fond of another world (real or imaginary) in order to have something to change it to" (HO:310). Reform implies form: a shape or ideal by which to mould and reshape what has been deformed. This is no less true for Chesterton's dramatology, where reading is a creative act of matching a text up with a particular form or worldview. If the text deviates from his ideal, Chesterton then takes the liberty of trying to set things right. Thus, his dramatological vision is always geared towards an ethical aim. It is not merely that man has the ability to choose, but that man can choose what is good or bad (IS:260). This is what makes this "act of self-limitation" profound (HO:243). What is good is ultimately an issue of love, which is the decision to bind oneself in commitment to another. It is a decision to notice and uphold the complementary nature of divisions and differences in the created order.

In the discussion of Chesterton's epistemology, it became obvious that, in keeping with his cosmology, he prioritises consistency, coherence and integration when it comes to structuring one's understanding. It does not help, for instance, to be sceptical when such scepticism is impossible to live by (ST:170). This is to say that it is of no benefit to have a theory when one's theory is utterly remote from and useless for existence. The implication that ideas have an impact on human actions is central to Chesterton's outlook. His search for knowledge, then, is a search for a key that fits a particularly complex lock (EM:248). He sees that the world has an order to it, and therefore concludes that it must be possible to understand it. He finds that life feels like a story, implying that there must be a storyteller who composed it.

He suggests that there are four basic, unprovable assumptions in the alphabet of philosophy. The first is that the world actually exists and can be known and interpreted, the second is that the world actually matters and has meaning, the third is that there is such a thing as a continuous self that can

engage with this meaning, and the fourth, to reiterate Chesterton's perpetual love for limitations, is that human beings have the ability to choose, which is to say that they have responsibility over their thoughts and actions (HO:229; MO:92). These four pillars of philosophy all argue that knowledge is reliant upon faith and that interpretation is equally faith-bound. Chesterton does not mean this to imply that human knowledge is in any way diminished by this fact, but simply wants to emphasise that when it comes to encountering the world, it is not our own ability to control and determine reality through mere mental projection and rationalisation that ultimately matters. Rather, what becomes important is our awareness that we are part of a drama that is not of our own making. Moreover, this awareness indicates that reality is not merely a conglomeration of coincidences. Even if everything is ultimately random and meaningless, it is always perceived through a mind that makes meaning.

Still, Chesterton pays close attention to human fallibility in the arena of knowledge. While he acknowledges and applauds the human capacity for understanding, he proposes the need for a kind of humility that recognises both the limitations of our understanding and where it can go wrong. He offers that everyone is educated, but that a great number of people are educated "incorrectly" and thus are open to being further mislead (WW:147). In this, he again seems to be highly aware of the way that a person's horizon of understanding affects the way he perceives. When it comes to the unfamiliar, as that which falls outside our current framework of understanding, it is possible to mistake "what is real for what is sham" (WW:101). The purpose of the pursuit of knowledge, then, is to strive to reclaim what is true over what is false and what is real over what is perceived, because a lack of such knowledge leads to a lack of self-understanding (HO:257). The aim of Chesterton's dramatic epistemology is to understand that it is possible to come into contact with reality, however incompletely, as it truly is. However, when coming into contact with reality, man and his epistemological prowess still remain secondary to and dependant upon the drama in which they occur. No man is an island, even when he perceives himself to be in isolation (VA).

Having covered the foundations of Chesterton's epistemology, Chapter Two then outlined his ontology. It was clear at the outset of the chapter that Chesterton does not present his worldview in as systematic a way as I have done, but there are clues and statements that can be drawn upon in order to present a cohesive picture. It became certain that Chesterton contends that thinking has to do with "connecting things" only because he holds very strongly to the notion that things are already somehow connected (HO:238). Being itself is a drama that, as I proposed, may be contemplated via three considerations. In the first place, being may be regarded as a riddle. This points to the idea that there is a mystery at the core of being that is not necessarily intelligible. And yet, the presence of this mystery in and beyond all things is what makes other things intelligible. Solitary facts are therefore

not sufficient for bringing intelligibility about (CQ:32; HO:231). Rather, it is mystery that brings about clarity (HO:231). For Chesterton, the world that we inhabit is the "the best of all impossible worlds"(CD:290). Its greatest "merit is not that it is orderly and explicable" but "that it is wild and utterly unexplained" (CD:290). This awareness of mystery gives rise to the idea of gratitude that is at the heart of Chesterton's attitude to things. Life is a gift, and if any answer to being might be discerned, that too would be a gift (HO:258). This is discerned by gratitude, which is given life by humility. Thus, regarding Chesterton's interpretive understanding, the aim is not exegetical dominance over the hermeneutical landscape, but rather interpretive modesty within a space of intersubjective possibilities. However, this modesty ought not to be confused with doubt and uncertainty. Rather, it is a means for holding certainty lightly, in faith and in community. It does not mean that truth is relative in any pejorative, solipsistic sense, but rather that truth is relational; it is discovered in a network of dramatic relationships.

I pointed out, when shifting focus from the riddle to the answer of being that "[b]eing is both mysterious and revelatory in character" (Reyburn 2011:55). Being, for Chesterton, is ultimately "secondary and dependant" (ST:158). It does not seem to him that existence is sufficiently self-sufficient to go on existing without any kind of divine assistance (ST:158). Being is therefore both separate and interconnected, not just in the material realm, but in the metaphysical realm as well. It is disclosed to itself as a paradoxical drama by means of the tool of language. For Chesterton, reality and the recognition of reality are "two agencies at work," and their meeting is "a kind of marriage" (ST:169). This is to say that perception and reality are impossible to disconnect from each other. Even if one's perception ends up being incorrect, that incorrect perception would still be tied to the world that is being perceived.

While there is clearly something like an objective world, Chesterton uses terms like *objectivity* and *subjectivity* in such as way as to avoid creating a clear Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter. The mind is not merely "servile to his environment," nor is it purely creative (ST:139). Chesterton argues that (interpretive) understanding — the answer to the riddle of being — takes place from within and alongside a world (EM:9). As Chapter Two concluded, it was put forward that there is an innate romance in being that compels us to contemplate the dance between the riddle and the answer of being, and thus between mystery and revelation. Romance, a word with all "the mystery and ancient meaning of Rome" (HO:212), finds hospitality both in the "strange" and in the "secure" (HO:213). It is that which compels the imagination towards deeper wonderment. Chesterton's dramatic philosophy, which contemplates the intricate connections and disconnections of things, reveals that the interpretive experience is never static. The way that we interpret, therefore, is less akin to dissecting a corpse than it is to participating in a play. As Chapter Two concluded, it was

noted that this play is metareferential; that is, for Chesterton, it is an issue of becoming aware of one's place within a story that is not of one's own making.

A central aim in participating in this play was argued in Chapter Three. There it was offered that there is a single idea that acts as Chesterton's point of departure and return, informing and shaping everything that he considers in his work without prescribing any kind of reductionism. It is the idea of the "dignity of man" (AU:239; EM:52-53; HO:94, 298; ST:36, 177; WW:15). Chesterton sees his own era, and would probably then see the age in which we live today, as one "in which we must defend human dignity" (MO:74). For him, human dignity is of greater importance than any other subject, discourse or argument. Everything he writes is therefore geared towards introducing and maintaining this ideal, which strives to find what is "good for everybody" (Ahlquist 2006:272).

Chapter Three proposed that the ideal of human dignity is found in various expressions of the paradox of the Incarnation, which sees the "common conscience of sane people" as something that is simultaneously "the voice of God" and "the voice of Man" (MO:120). The paradox of the Incarnation may be regarded as the primary key to unlocking Chesterton's dramatology by means of an understanding of three dimensions of human dignity that should be defended: first, the common man, then common sense, and finally democracy. It was noticed that Chesterton's interpretive lens is focused away from the pride of the privileged aristocracy and towards the common man. The fact that he is more supportive of orthodoxy than of heresy is one example of this focus. However, while he supports the dignity of the common man, he recognises that the masses do go wrong, often because they follow the lead of the aristocracy. To follow the thin, totalising philosophies of Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, for example, is tantamount to losing our humanity. For this reason, it may be suggested that Chesterton did not neglect the importance of leadership. For him, those in power ought to serve those who have none.

With regard to his defense of common sense, Chesterton writes that "the most practical and important thing about a man is his view of the universe" (HO:41). Ideas have consequences, he notices, and ultimately words are deeds. He even contends that "[p]hilosophy is always present in a work of art" (in Ahlquist 2006:61). At the heart of Chesterton's dramatology — what I believe to be a valuable contribution to hermeneutic discourse in general — is human attitude and character. Chesterton is not just interested in getting the facts right, as if interpretation were merely concerned with literal correctness, but with reading in the right manner. The facts are important, and interpretive accuracy is to be applauded, but these are not to be deemed more important than a sense of wonder at a world filled with wonders (HO:212). Thus he observes that "[t]he world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder" (TT:7). This is not to say, however,

that he promotes blind credulity; in fact, his greatest critique of sceptics is that they are "too credulous" (HO:353). In the absence of a definite ideal with a definite sense of limitations, the sceptic is more easily taken in by weaker ideas. Even Žižek (2009c:298) seems to agree with this idea when he writes, "Chesterton was right: if we do not believe in God, we are ready to believe in anything. Belief in God is a constitutive exception which enables us to assert the factual rationality of the universe". Chesterton is always looking for the ways that "doctrine and design" illuminate the "forest" of reality (HO:362). Common sense, in his view, should aim towards "altering the human soul" to comply with reality, rather than trying to change that reality in order "to fit the human soul" (WW:80). I have taken this idea as central to the larger metareferential character of Chesterton's dramatology, which is not just to illuminate the meaning of a text, but to situate the self within the larger theodrama of creation and redemption.

One aspect of this theodrama is the place of the individual within a specific historical context. This is an idea that is frequently addressed in Chesterton's writings. Man is a historical being, deeply influenced in his outlook by temporal constraints. This idea is fundamental to Chesterton's defense of democracy, which is coupled with his defenses of the common man and common sense. Democracy is not merely a political concept, although it does affect one's politics, but is a form of interrogating what it means to participate in the things common to man. In other words, Chesterton's democracy is more akin to a religious conviction than to a political ideology (Oddie 2008:191). It affirms that, despite many trivial differences, man remains the image of God . Therefore, truth should always be something possessed by the public and not just the elite. In this way, democracy places the value of individual humans and their activities over intellectual systems, and claims that reality has more unity in it than any representational schema may conclude.

The "most terribly important things [should] be left to ordinary men themselves" (HO:250). This is the primary way that Chesterton undermines the hegemony of a totalising schema: he deflects power to those who have none so that they may continue to be preoccupied with the common domestic activities of ordinary life. He recognises that when the state or any other institution takes charge over such matters, the common man always ends up suffering. This is not to say, however, that such things as reality and representation in the life of the common man should not be discussed. In fact, he proposes that the "most dangerous assumptions are [always] the ones we don't discuss" (in Clarke 2006:176). Common sense, as manifested in a democratic ethos, does not mean that there is such a thing as the absence of a need for interpretation. Rather, it means that questioning our original assumptions is vital to the interpretive task, and this includes the importance of questioning and doubting our doubts. For Chesterton, there is always a social dimension to the drama of the individual. Democracy, therefore, is permanently connected with tradition. Tradition

brings the individual into conversation with those who are no longer present. It is that which gives a voice even to the dead.

Towards the end of Chapter Three, I discussed the importance of fairytales for understanding Chesterton's thinking. Fairytales use fictional stories to underscore truths that transcend the merely factual dimension of human perception. They point to ideals and values that are common to all people, and especially provide insight into the human need both for something settled and for something strange; for a sense of being at home and yet also a feeling of being on an adventure. This tension, between fiction and fact, and between the settled and the strange, paved the way for the discussion in Chapter Four, which centered on what I called the elements of Chesterton's dramatology. It was suggested, in line with Kenner (1948:24-25) and Milbank (2009a), that Chesterton's primary tools for driving his thinking towards reconciliation, reform and revolution are analogy, paradox and defamiliarisation. It was stressed, in keeping with the defense of human dignity presented in Chapter Three, that the paradox of the Incarnation anchors Chesterton's use of these devices. Analogy points to the idea that language is a means by which reality is accessed, but is not necessarily the reality itself. It is a window, but not the view. It was shown that analogy ruptures dichotomies in logic and rationalisations by self-critically exposing its own limitations. As a device by which one finds "agreement between agreement and disagreement" (AU:332), it affirms both difference and sameness, and is therefore paradoxical in character.

Paradox, perhaps the device for which Chesterton is best known, is a means by which the mind is kept lively, always questioning and engaged in the drama that it participates in. As something formed around Chesterton's emphasis on the Incarnation, paradox points beyond the tensions that it contains to a truth that language cannot hold. It resists reduction or conflation and therefore, together with its emphasis on the dignity of the common man, also resists the totalisation of metanarrative. If one does not want "dilution" but the exuberant power of things at their "full strength," then the conviction of Chesterton provides a clear answer: in a contest between two "furious" truths that seem to contradict, one ought to be able to keep them both and keep them both furious (HO:299). Paradox is an event of language that creates startling contrasts, forcing the individual to always rethink his assumptions in the light of the picture before him. For Chesterton, life is more a picture with shades of variation and specificity than a pattern of mindless repetitions. However, he notices that the human tendency is to take the picture and conform it to a pattern of the mind, thus reducing life to something mechanical and merely theoretical. Therefore, what is needed, which is evident in both analogy and paradox, is a process of defamiliarisation by which perception is unsettled and destabilised. The primary function of this defamiliarisation is to leave

room for the individual to once again receive what is being perceived as a gift. As always, Chesterton prioritises an interpretive lens that leaves room for wonder.

In Chapters Five and Six, I then offered an application of Chesterton's dramatology to Terrence Malick's *The tree of life*. This was done through a discussion of the two angles of his stereoscopic, incarnational vision: first by analysing the film through the lens of mystery, and then by analysing it through the lens of revelation. With mystery and revelation kept in tension, and with both guided towards recovery via the romance of re-membering, it was recognised that — as Chesterton notes of the book of *Job* —perception concerns the link between appearance and reality. Therefore, one ought to always be rethinking one's assumptions in the light of new discoveries. Mystery compels one to consider how what one does not know can inform and shape one's perception, and revelation compels one to examine things along the lines of particular perceptual and physical limitations. Interpretive understanding, therefore, is always presented as a dance between the unknown and the known, the invisible and the visible.

As Chesterton demonstrates by constantly revisiting old ideas through new metaphors, his dramatology may be considered revolutionary. He suggests that "[t]he corruption in things is not only the best argument for being progressive; it is also the only argument against being conservative" (HO:320). The conservative tries to maintain things by leaving them alone. But this is hermeneutically detrimental, since by leaving "things alone you leave [them] to a torrent of change. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you want it to be white you must always be painting it again; that is you must always be having a revolution" (HO:320). This becomes a principle that does not only apply to "inanimate things" but to "all human things" (HO:320). It is a general principle that I take to hold true for Chesterton's dramatology: he invites his readers to look at old things and old ideas only because it is the old ideas that are really new.

7.2 Contribution of the study

As noted in Chapter One, this study has been formulated to contribute to two particular arenas of discourse, namely scholarship on the work of GK Chesterton and scholarship for the discipline of visual culture studies. Regarding this study's contribution to Chesterton scholarship, it has aimed to provide a map of sorts by which Chesterton's dramatology may be navigated. For obvious reasons, many others have remarked upon the fact that Chesterton has a unique and important way of seeing things, but, to date, most works that deal directly with Chesterton's interpretive lens outside of his

biographical context deal with it thematically, as in the work of Ahlquist (2006), Clark (2009) and Schall (2000). However, following the lead of such scholars as Kenner (1948), Milbank (2009a), Nichols (2009) and Wood (2011), I have tried to step slightly beyond this purely thematic approach by presenting a uniquely structured way of understanding the dramatic shape of that interpretive lens. This is not to say that I have abandoned the thematic approach completely in this thesis, as is especially noticeable in the analysis of *Tree of life* in Chapters Five and Six. Rather, I have simply tried to sketch a framework or context by which the themes of Chesterton's writings may be navigated in terms of his articulations around his own interpretive experiences. I do not doubt that another scholar would have taken a different approach and may have even arrived at slightly different conclusions, but I think that the present study has at least provided valid justifications for viewing Chesterton's interpretive lens in this way, especially through an interrogation of the foundation, task, elements and application of his dramatology.

By arguing the shape of Chesterton's dramatology in the way that I have, I have offered that Chesterton's philosophical stance is not only unique on a propositional level, but offers insights into a hermeneutic experience that moves beyond the perspectival Cartesian gaze. I have proposed that his writings can and do provide illumination into the way that interpretation actually functions, not as a narrow objectivism, but as a participatory activity. While I have clearly drawn upon the work of other scholars to guide my own research, my contention that Chesterton's dramatological approach provides insights into (visual) hermeneutics in general is my primary contribution to Chesterton scholarship. In particular, as just mentioned, I have suggested that Chesterton's dramatology resists totalisation by stressing the importance of the common man — the individual — and by offering that attitude precedes doctrine and thus also methodology. In other words, inasmuch as dramatology is concerned with dogmas, truth claims and propositions, it is primarily concerned with a deeper camaraderie in the dramatic nature of human relationships with the world and with each other.

Even though I have kept biographical detail at a distance throughout this study, two such details do help to show the relevance of such a claim. Firstly, there is the fact of Chesterton's deep friendship with his intellectual opponents, George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells. While differing significantly from these two men on an ideological front, their friendship was so full of deep care and admiration precisely because Chesterton prioritised their personhood over his own dogmas. The fact that Chesterton's hospitality was reciprocated by these men is a further confirmation of the importance of attitude and intellectual humility over dogma and intellectual arrogance. Then, secondly, the importance of this camaraderie is emphasised by Cosmo Hamilton's account of his own experience of debating against Chesterton. He writes:

> To hear Chesterton's howl of joy ... to see him double himself up in agony of laughter at my personal insults, to watch the effect of his sportsmanship on a shocked audience who were won to mirth by his intense and pea-hen-like quarks of joy was a sight and sound for the gods ... and I carried away from that room a respect and admiration for this tomboy among dictionaries, this philosophical Peter Pan, this humorous Dr Johnson, this kindly and gallant cherub, this profound student and wise master which has grown ever since ... It was monstrous, gigantic, amazing, deadly, delicious. Nothing like it has ever been done before or will ever be seen, heard and felt like it again (in Yancey 2001:54-55)

The complementary nature of this quotation, while highlighting the way that Chesterton's joy dismantled the potency of a volley of insults, also points to a possible shortcoming in this study that I am highly aware of, namely that it is not particularly critical of Chesterton. However, this is only because my intention has not been to provide a criticism. Instead, I have desired only to look at his way of seeing. Throughout the study, I have chosen to prioritise Chesterton's opinions over and above those of others in accordance with the Gadamerian call for a suppression of hermeneutic prejudice. I have thus focused more on finding ways to assume the validity of his opinions than on finding ways to discredit them. This, however, has not been to suggest in any way that he is an utterly flawless thinker. Such an assumption, more hagiographical than hermeneutic, would sound unjustifiable even to Chesterton.

Then, regarding the contribution of this thesis to the field of visual culture studies, its primary function of has been to add to discourse around visual hermeneutics. To date, I am the only scholar who has suggested that Chesterton's work, and especially his way of seeing, may be helpful for engaging with contemporary images and representations in visual culture studies. And while I have already contributed some work to presenting the relevance of Chesterton's work to this field, this thesis outlines a larger context for understanding Chesterton's interpretive perception. One application of Chesterton's dramatology was offered by bringing it into conversation with a particular visual text: Malick's *The tree of life* (2011). In addition, this study suggests that the work of this profound British journalist, who is not an intellectual elitist, may also be relevant to the field especially in that it encourages the reader to look at old things in new ways in the hope that they will be seen as if for the first time (SW:13).

7.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

It is fitting that this study must own up to its limitations, especially following Chesterton's admission of his own love for "edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another" (AU:41). While the aim of this study — to present an overview and explanation of Chesterton's dramatology for the context of visual culture studies and visual hermeneutics — has been achieved with regard to a specific application, a few additional avenues regarding Chesterton's interpretive practice have been left unexplored. This is not surprising considering the primary aim of hermeneutics, which is to contribute to a conversation rather than to offer a way to end discussion. One avenue left unexplored in this study is noticed in the fact that it has not compared Chesterton's close readings of the work of other writers — like Austen, Browning, Chaucer, Dickens, and Shakespeare, among others — with their own work or with the work of other commentators on their work. Such study, I believe, while more appropriate for the hermeneutics of literature criticism, would provide further valuable insights into his dramatology, especially on a metatheoretical level; it would also, perhaps, open up new ways of broadening and deepening an understanding the applicability of Chesterton's work to visual hermeneutics.

Then, as was disclosed even in my preliminary literature study, it became clear that Chesterton's dramatology shows some similarities with the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially in the way that he insists upon the different functions of scientific research and frameworks of understanding within the human sciences. It has not been my aim to compare their interpretive approaches in this study, although a few of the footnotes and side comments that I have offered do make this link apparent. Still, I do believe that further comparison and study would prove insightful for grappling with the complementary outlooks of both of these intellectual giants. While coming out of quite different contexts, and despite writing for vastly different purposes, somehow, as far as I can tell for now, their interpretive practices seem to overlap more than they diverge. It should follow, then, that it may also be worth exploring Chesterton's dramatology in comparison with and in contrast to other hermeneutic philosophies and practices. Certainly, as in the case of Gadamer, Chesterton strives for interpretive truth beyond method, and even allows for the fact that reading is less an act of capturing absolutes than it is an act of participating in a drama.

Through this research, I have also discovered a link between Chesterton's thoughts on the materiality of existence and the media theory of McLuhan that further research could elaborate upon. It may be especially worthwhile studying the similarities and differences in their outlooks on account of the fact that McLuhan was deeply influenced by the work of Chesterton and agreed with the Thomist ontology that is foundational to his thinking. Finally, regarding Chesterton's applicability to visual hermeneutics in general, I have intimated from the start that this is only the

start. In other contexts, I have already demonstrated that Chesterton's dramatology is appropriate for other expressions of visual culture (Reyburn 2011; 2012). In my mind, this research can definitely be both deepened and expanded. I am absolutely certain that there is much more that can still be said about the importance of Chesterton's work for our present historical horizon of understanding, and it will take a fair amount of violent restraint from friends and family to prevent me from taking some of the ideas explored in this study into new territory.