

Tilting After the Trenches:
The Quixotic Return of Heroism in G.K. Chesterton's Modernism

Luke J. Foster | April 6, 2015
Prof. Erik Gray, Advisor

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Dedicated to Grace Catherine Greiner, a hope unlooked-for and a light undimmed.

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses."

Heroic and Ironic Chivalry

Today almost forgotten, G.K. Chesterton's "Lepanto" achieved immense popularity during World War I as a heroic vindication of the British cause. Chesterton published "Lepanto" three years before the outbreak of war in the weekly he edited, *The Eye-Witness*. A 173-line poem in ballad form, "Lepanto" deals with the decisive naval battle of 1571 when a coalition fleet drawn from the Habsburg Empire and several Italian city-states defeated a superior Ottoman naval force in the Ionian Sea. But from the decisively stressed opening syllables ("White founts falling"¹), "Lepanto" looks beyond the historical significance of the battle and seeks to establish a myth with much broader implications. Chesterton, as his biographer Ian Ker explains, claimed that the story of Lepanto demonstrated that "all wars were religious wars," and he intended the poem as a comment on the meaning of warfare in general.² After the outbreak of World War I, "Lepanto" was read as an encouragement to British troops in the field. Chesterton ardently supported propaganda efforts for the War and republished "Lepanto" in his 1915 collection under the heading "War Poems." John Buchan, an officer in Flanders and himself a renowned author, wrote to Chesterton on June 21, 1915, thanking him for the reminder "to make a clean job of settling this black Prussian barbarism" and testifying that "the other day in the trenches we shouted your *Lepanto*."³ Chesterton's work clearly lent itself to an un-ironic reading that cast Britain's troops in the role of heroic defenders of Christian civilization.

The poem seems to be structured around unsubtle binaries. The antagonist, "the Soldan of Byzantium" (l. 2) is little more than an icon of tyranny, his expression reduced to a symbol:

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Lepanto." *Modern British Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920); Bartleby.com, 1999. March 31, 2015. <<http://www.bartleby.com/103/91.html>>, l. 1; hereafter cited parenthetically.

² Ian Ker, *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 294.

³ John Buchan to G.K. Chesterton. "21st June, 1915." Add. MS 73235, f. 175. Western Manuscripts Collection. British Library. London, UK.

“There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared... It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips” (ll. 3-5). His smile expresses no emotion beyond confidence in the possession of power. The poem’s protagonist, Don John of Austria, smilingly acknowledges his weakness but refuses to submit to this calculus of power. The poem elevates his historical leadership to a metaphysical rebellion against humanity’s servitude to despair. Muhammad, fuming from heaven, orders that this impudent crusader be crushed:

“It is he that knows not Fate;
It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey at the gate!
It is he whose loss is laughter when he counts the wager worth,
Put down your feet upon him, that our peace be on the earth” (ll. 64-7).

Don John’s “loss is laughter” as he willingly embraces self-sacrifice; Muhammad responds with sheer coercion, asserting the supremacy of strength. As battle is joined and the poem rises to its climax, Chesterton makes the theme of fatalism versus freedom explicit. He introduces the galley-slaves on the Ottoman ships: “Christian captives sick and sunless, all a laboring race repines / Like a race in sunken cities, like a nation in the mines / ... They are countless, voiceless, hopeless as those fallen or fleeing on / Before the high Kings’ horses in the granite of Babylon” (ll. 118-123). The battle represents no less than the perennial romantic struggle of individual virtue against the massively superior strength of cruelty and oppression. But Don John, prayed on by the pope, wins the day.

Read from the other side of the brutal experience of World War I, these ebullient Chestertonian lines singing of heroic combat seem at best hollow and at worst a delusional jingoism that helped send a generation of young men to destruction. The very ballad form seems anachronistic for the early twentieth-century. Add to these inauspicious circumstances the poem’s setting as a celebration of a sixteenth-century crusade against Islam, and it seems mere chauvinism, barely worthy of academic consideration. But “Lepanto” remains significant not just

because of its wartime popularity with British soldiers who saw themselves represented as underdog heirs to a tradition of heroic crusading for Christian civilization. Chesterton ended the poem not with the prancing Don John but with a final image of nuanced and chastened heroism that would resonate enduringly in the literature of the Great War.

A reminder of the human tragedy of warfare offsets the otherwise-cloying triumphalism. After what appears to be the poem's victorious finale ("Don John of Austria / Has set his people free!" (ll. 136-7), Chesterton introduces a much more ironic hero. In the final stanza, Miguel de Cervantes, who lost a hand in the historical battle of Lepanto, looks up and "sees across a weary land a stragging road in Spain, / Up which a lean and foolish knight for ever rides in vain, / And he smiles, but not as Sultans smile, and settles back the blade" (ll. 140-2). The "foolish knight" Don Quixote certainly shares key attributes with Don John, expressing a romantic individuality rebelling against the fatalistic tyranny of the Sultan that opened the poem. But by also emphasizing the perennial vanity of Quixote's errantry, Chesterton critiques the arrogance of Don John's lack of irony. The Quixotic vision, after all, comes to the reader mediated through the gaze of the wounded warrior Cervantes, implying that Quixote's model of heroism is compatible with reflection on the experience of warfare's horrors. The wartime popularity of "Lepanto" therefore becomes significant, complicating the received understanding that the poetry of World War I expressed total disillusionment with received ideals of heroism. Chesterton's poem both foreshadows the irony of the trench poets and diverges from it, maintaining faith in the radically new, yet traditional, form of heroism represented by Don Quixote. It thus marks the beginning of an important development in Chesterton's work that would constitute his most important, and largely overlooked, contribution to the literature of the War.

In what follows, I examine the implications of Chesterton's Don Quixote myth in the context of the poetry of World War I. The first section details the literary history and criticism surrounding the War's power to shatter established myths and create new ones. I then consider the category of war memoir and its essentially therapeutic quality, arguing that Chesterton uses Don Quixote to comment on memoir while distancing himself from many of his contemporary memoirists. After examining a pair of early essays in which Chesterton laid out his views on Don Quixote, I engage with his most thorough articulation of the myth, his post-War novel *The Return of Don Quixote*. I argue that *The Return* combines the self-diagnosis of war memoir with the self-transcendence of questing heroism and examine parallel themes of ironic heroism in the trench poet Joyce Kilmer. I conclude that Chesterton's Quixote myth constitutes a signal contribution to the modernist response to the War.

Background: History and Criticism

Chesterton's weary and wistful Don Quixote does not predominate among the images of the Great War of 1914-18 that have lingered for a century in our cultural consciousness. Influenced by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, we think of poppies, barbed wire, and mustard gas. These trench poets, expressing their sense of the fragmentation of received meanings and the alienation of the individual before the cruel impersonality of the war, helped to usher in the linguistic and literary revolution of the Modernist movement. Trench poetry expressed irony and disenchantment, the shattering of inherited mythologies. But it also produced many myths of its own. One of these was Chesterton's, which offered an alternative to the more familiar Modernist response to the War.

The imaginative associations of the trench poetry would continue to resonate throughout the twentieth century. Paul Fussell, in his critical classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), argues, “The dynamics and iconography of the Great War have proved crucial political, rhetorical, and artistic determinants on subsequent life. At the same time as the war was relying on inherited myth, it was generating new myth, and that myth is part of the fiber of our lives.”⁴ Fussell describes the literary lesson of the war for British writers: irony was the overarching theme of the War that began with a generation dashing into combat expecting a glorious conclusion after the halcyon summer of 1914. After living through the Great War, most authors could no longer order the events of experience into a narrative “taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (21). The language of heroic tales rang hollow: the inherited tropes of “the quiet action of personal control and Christian self-abnegation,” seemed to have exhausted themselves after four years in Flanders (21).

Fussell’s assertion that a new mythology arose as a result of collective disillusionment at the hands of mechanistic reality may seem paradoxical, but the intellectual historian Michael Saler has recently argued that enchantment and disenchantment should not be read as an absolute binary. Complicating Max Weber’s analysis of modernity as “disenchanted,” Saler argues that modernity has instead given rise to a marketplace of different opportunities for re-enchantment from which individuals can choose. For Saler, “a specifically modern enchantment can be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: a disenchanted enchantment.”⁵ This paradoxical ability to enter into a story while acknowledging its unreality produces an

⁴ Paul Fussell. *The Great War & Modern Memory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. ix; hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁵ Michael Saler. *As If: Modern Disenchantment and the Literary PreHistory of Reality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 12; hereafter cited parenthetically.

“ironic imagination” (14). In the early twentieth century, the number of fictional products to consume proliferated. Saler focuses on the upside of the loss of an authoritative, unified cultural mythology: “Rather than experiencing disenchantment from the loss of universal meanings, one could find a specifically modern enchantment arising from an outlook that embraced pluralistic, provisional, and contingent interpretations” (19). Saler links this proliferating pluralism to a new, more democratic public discourse about religious and political ideas. Literary myths help modern people recognize that the status quo is contingent: *it could have been otherwise*. This interplay of competing mythologies would also foster demand for myths—like Chesterton’s Don Quixote—that questioned the dominant assumptions of post-War literary culture.

The emergence of the mythology of First World War trench poetry particularly fits Saler’s rubric because it represents a watershed moment in the authority structures of Anglophone literary culture. Before the war, an aristocracy of English “men of letters”—literary virtuosos who combined great ability in fields ranging from journalism to poetry—wielded enormous influence to shape popular attitudes across the English-speaking world. D.G. Wright comments on the prestige such cultural priest-figures as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, and Chesterton himself enjoyed: “Leading writers were major public figures in a manner remote from our modern culture... They were assumed to possess weighty opinions on a variety of subjects, in a humanist tradition reaching back to Cicero.”⁶ When Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, the public looked to the men of letters to teach them how to perceive the conflict and the Asquith cabinet soon sought to leverage their influence to shore up the Government’s credibility. On September 2, Charles Masterman, a peripheral member of the Cabinet charged with coordinating propaganda to neutral countries, convened a secret meeting of

⁶ D.G. Wright. “The Great War, Government Propaganda and English ‘Men of Letters’ 1914-16,” *Literature & History: A New Journal for the Humanities*. No. 7, Spring 1978, p. 71.

these prominent writers, including Chesterton, to prepare a case for the British cause, a narrative they were already patriotically inclined to propagate. The group published a famous open letter in *The Times* on September 18, declaring, “Destiny and duty, alike for us and all the English-speaking race, call upon us to uphold the rule of common justice between civilized peoples, to defend the rights of small nations, and to maintain the free and law-abiding ideals of Western Europe against the rule of ‘Blood and Iron.’”⁷ Throughout the first months of the war, these authors produced eloquent defenses, from poetry to pamphlets, of the British *casus belli*.

The aristocratic gatekeepers of British literary taste thus staked their credibility on legitimating the war. The bitter pattern of static warfare on the Western Front became more deeply entrenched. Reports—and poetry—came back from the lines, beginning to shift popular opinion against the authority the men of letters represented. The literary sphere was becoming democratized, with more and more voices capable of participating. In past wars throughout the majority of human history, few soldiers could read or write, and even fewer composed verse.⁸ But Fussell notes that the democratic dynamic of universal literacy, unique in the history of warfare, coincided with the continued reign of an “aristocratic” ideal that honored “the educative powers of classical and English literature” (157). The result, according to Fussell, was “an atmosphere of public respect for literature” never possible before and unimaginable since (157). Though 1914 would prove the beginning of the end for the man-of-letters ideal, these authors’ influence persisted and overlapped with the emerging modernist writers.

⁷ Quoted in Wright, “Men of Letters,” p. 72. This letter reflected the liberal rhetoric that sought to distinguish British motives from German. Chesterton in particular would emphasize the British declaration of war as a defense of heroic little Belgium against Prussian cynical *realpolitik*. Cf. “The Martyrdom of Belgium, An Appeal by G.K. Chesterton,” pp. 221-2 in Charles Sarolea’s *How Belgium Saved Europe*, William Heinemann: London, 1915.

⁸ Malvern Van Wyk Smith. *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 3.

Our cultural memory has seen the complicity of the established men of letters with Masterman's propaganda as decisively alienating many of the trench poets, who were mostly university-educated young line officers, from their elders. But even the bitterest of disillusioned youths continued to read the darkly ironic Thomas Hardy: Siegfried Sassoon's story that he was crouched in a dug-out reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* two nights before going over the top at the Somme has become the stuff of legend (Fussell 7). Fussell observes that Hardy's 1914 collection of darkly ironic poetry, *Satires of Circumstance*, "offer[ed] a medium for perceiving the events of the war just beginning" (Fussell 3). Hardy's horrors—the dead who speak without offering comfort to the living, the callous abuse of worldly power, and innocence juxtaposed with desolation—seemed perfectly suited to the first few months of war. Sassoon explicitly acknowledged that *Satires of Circumstance* shaped the biting satire of his own poetry. Wright argues that Hardy's impact stemmed from his unique ability "to bridge the imaginative and real gap that opened between soldiers and civilians."⁹ Hardy, then, midwived the post-War poetic revolt by Sassoon and his comrades.

Never again would a definable set of 'men of letters' be looked to as guides for the nation, and never again would Hardy's successors write like his contemporaries. "The war itself acted as a powerful catalyst on the modern movement, producing a major fissure between literary generations, so that in the decade after the war the established writers of 1914 came to appear increasingly old-fashioned in both outlook and technique."¹⁰ Faith in the meliorist myth of human progress that had so inflected the Victorian imagination could not endure in a generation that had survived the mud of Flanders. The new modernist self-protecting skepticism and introspection demanded a retreat from heroism and "a reluctance to share the willingness of men

⁹ Wright, "The Great War, Government Propaganda and English 'Men of Letters' 1914-16," p. 92.

¹⁰ Wright, "Men of Letters," p. 93.

like Wells and Shaw to evaluate confidently and mechanically the tendencies of the times and pronounce unhesitatingly on any great question.”¹¹ The new poem of the hour was *The Waste Land*. The inevitable human subjection to mortality could itself be read as “the one ultimate Satire of Circumstance” (Fussell 6). Irony came to dominate the imagination of a generation. Yet Hardy was not the only Edwardian man of letters to grapple with mythic irony: Chesterton both anticipated and responded to the work of the trench poets.

Chesterton’s Cervantes: Memoir, not Therapy

In his article “Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs,” Yuval Harari further interrogates this received critical narrative of disillusionment in World War I literature. He points out, “During the war itself, few people interpreted it using the paradigm of disillusionment, and even in the 1920s and 1930s the disillusioned view of war was still a minority elitist view.”¹² It was only later in the twentieth century that disillusionment became “the most common public paradigm for interpreting martial experience,” as veterans writing memoirs shifted their narrative position from “hero to victim” (47, 43). Yet this shift did not reflect a qualitative difference in battlefield experiences from the trenches of the Great War onward. The transformation reflected and then fueled modern Western anxieties about selfhood.

Harari notes that Renaissance conditions of warfare were often just as miserable and casualty rates just as high as those of World War I. The Renaissance battlefield too saw massive technological change akin to the mechanization of 1914-18—the introduction of firearms. Yet

¹¹ Wright, “Men of Letters,” p. 94.

¹² Yuval Noah Harari, “Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs.” *The Journal of Military History* 69.1 2005, p. 46, hereafter cited parenthetically.

Renaissance memoirists still largely celebrate their warrior ethos. They “are clearly aware of the ugly and stupid face of war, yet they are not concerned about it very much (unless their honor is at stake), and it does not prevent them from cherishing martial honor and from seeing war as a worthy vocation” (54). The expectations of an honor and shame culture that these writers had so deeply internalized prevented them from viewing themselves as victims, despite the brutality of their experiences. Their self-conception would have been radically alien to twentieth-century warriors. The Tommies of the trenches certainly were raised with the dream of chivalry, but, more importantly, they grew up internalizing the Enlightenment notion of *Bildung*, of life as a series of personality-shaping experiences assimilated in a narrative of self-actualization. Therefore, soldiering called into question identity itself, because it “was so discontinuous with the soldiers’ lives before and after the war, that it made it hard to view life as a process through which a ‘self’ endures and develops. The main task of twentieth-century memoirists has been precisely to overcome this threat, and weave the story of their lives together again” (68). The mythology that became dominant post-War therefore represented a therapeutic attempt to recover self-understanding by assimilating the experience of suffering into a newly coherent narrative. Within this context, the power of Chesterton’s vision of Cervantes the memoirist writing an alternative myth becomes more apparent.

By concluding “Lepanto” as he did in 1911, Chesterton anticipated both the memoirists of World War I themselves and Harari’s insights into their process of self-construction through memorialization. “Lepanto” figures Cervantes as a recorder and ironic interpreter of his own experience, a common soldier who spins myths from his memories. In this regard, he seems to parallel Sassoon or Owen or any of Harari’s subjects. Eric Leed, in *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in the First World War*, goes further than Harari in theorizing this phenomenon of self-

narrativizing. The alienation of the War prompted veterans to seek an alien imagery for describing their own lives. Memoirists resorted to myth to express the “disintegration of the [prewar] identity” and the radical discontinuity of the wartime self.¹³ Cervantes’ centuries-old myth of a fantastical would-be hero who suffers acute chronological displacement and cannot endure the banalities of civilian life, anticipates Leed’s notion that the memoirists of World War I experienced a radical break between their pre- and post-War selves. Cervantes experiences both a temporal and spatial displacement: while on deck in the middle of a fleet, he envisions an overland journey. Quixote “forever rides” up his road, rendering him almost a Sisyphean image of eternal action. Chesterton’s Cervantes reminiscing and trying to make sense of his experience, resorts to myth just as Fussell would predict. As a larger-than-life image of soldierhood, Cervantes’ imagined Quixote also contrasts radically with the two other major warrior-figures of “Lepanto”: Don John and the unnamed “Soldan” Selim II, whose entire face is a cruel smile. The story Cervantes pictures unfolding in lines 138-142 is nothing so straightforward as a glorification of crusading heroism. The “land” is “weary,” the “road” “stragglings”; the un-named Quixote receives the inaccurate honorific of “knight,” but he is also identified as “lean and foolish.” His errantry is “vain.” This hero, if hero he is, has none of the moral certitude, the zeal for a just cause, that marks Don John. But he is also free of the worldly arrogance, the swagger of sheer force, that taints the sultan.

For Chesterton to engage so deeply with the task of memorializing war in “Lepanto” represents a remarkable act of imagination. Chesterton would later join the other men of letters in enthusiastically endorsing the British declaration of war as a defense of Belgium. And of course “Lepanto” was largely read, as the Buchan letter indicates (“Today in the trenches we shouted

¹³ Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

your *Lepanto*”), as a simple call to arms for the British cause, elevating trench combat to a world-historical watershed as decisive as the rescue of Europe from the Ottoman fleet. But, by giving the final word in the poem to Cervantes, Chesterton conjures up a more nuanced set of associations. The ambiguity of Quixote in Cervantes’ novel—for his painfully real follies, his crippling nostalgia and his confrontation with organized religion are all inevitably intertwined with his resilient optimism—render him something of an anti-hero. Quixote does not evoke the stiff-upper-lip hero that Fussell presents as the reigning myth that had nourished the Edwardian boys who became the men of the trenches. Quixote as a model warrior is deeply ironic. Chesterton, by shifting the focus of his war poem to the perspective of a wounded soldier producing a fictionalized narrative to give structure to his experience, seems proleptically to be joining the trench poets in creating another myth for the emerging marketplace of fictions. Harari and Saler offer a rubric for understanding this dynamic. But Chesterton took discourses of heroism in a different direction than the trench poets did. The poem still ends with the victory of Don John (“*Don John of Austria rides home from the Crusade*” (l. 143)), even though its conclusion does not give him the unambiguous last word. Cervantes can still smile, and the final action of “he settles back the blade” evokes closure and contentment. This pre-War poem, at least, does not straightforwardly reflect Harari’s analysis of the soldier’s shift from a self-conception as hero to victim. Chesterton is ironic, but far from disillusioned.

Origins of Chesterton’s Don Quixote Myth

Chesterton began to articulate this re-interpretation of the original romance of *Don Quixote* very early in his published career and would continue to develop it throughout the rest of his life. Quixote was not to be read as a failure or as the butt of Cervantes’ jokes, but as the true

voice of sanity in a world gone mad through cynicism. Both in his poetry and prose, Chesterton upheld Don Quixote as a model of self-sacrificing heroism that could assimilate the irony and suffering of wartime experience. The visionary move of the concluding lines of “Lepanto” thus illustrates his larger understanding: Quixote serves as an alternative to the simplistic crusading heroism of Don John. This reading of Quixote was central to Chesterton’s overarching critique of modernity. In *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis*, John Coates argues that the Don Quixote myth served a central philosophical role in Chesterton’s thought as both “an image of life” and “an historical testimony.”¹⁴ In the pre-War version of the myth, Chesterton read Quixote as the incarnation of a liberating revolt against the deterministic forces that would stifle the individual.

Chesterton published his first major consideration of Quixote in his 1901 *Daily News* essay, “The Divine Parody of *Don Quixote*,” when he was beginning to make a name for himself as a controversialist. The essay applauds “the spiritual energy of which, as in all books, the story is only the product and the symbol.”¹⁵ Cervantes’ romance presents the starry-eyed chivalric idealism of Quixote himself and the hard-nosed worldly realism of his interlocutors as both true. Wisdom lies in resolving the paradox, because the “doubt and turmoil” endemic to human life stems from dilemmas between competing truths, between different aspects of “the enormous amount of good in the world” (25). Chesterton also focuses on the historical dimension of Cervantes’ enduring relevance. He sees the Quixote myth as continuing to appeal to twentieth-century people because it iterates a type of the central Christian image of triumph through weakness. That spirit of romantic paradox resonates intuitively even amid a secularizing culture: “Adventure and ceremonial, chivalry and idolatry, fantastic pride and a fantastic humility lie at

¹⁴ John Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis*. (Pickering: Hull University Press, 1984), p. 100.

¹⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors*. Ed. Dorothy Collins. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953). “The Divine Parody of *Don Quixote*,” p. 25, hereafter cited parenthetically.

the very root of our institutions and in the inmost chamber of our imagination” (27). Here Quixote represents not merely a sentimental medievalism, but a transcendent critique of what Chesterton saw as the impersonality of modernity.

Quixote, in asserting the possibility of heroism and riding off to personally right wrongs, represents “the last individual,” the bureaucrat’s nemesis, “the foe of that civilization which thinks that everything is best trusted to an institution” (27). Chesterton appreciates the Quixote quest as a revolt against the coercive, abstract structures of governance in modern states. The story, Chesterton argues, reminds readers of the deep sanity of being mad enough to trust to personal integrity and friendship—for Quixote cannot be imagined apart from Sancho Panza—over trusting in abstraction and system. Chesterton saw this relational dimension as part of the radicalism of Cervantes’ novel. Already by 1901, Chesterton was articulating his new interpretation of *Don Quixote*—a bold reading that seems almost willfully to overlook the anti-individualistic qualities of Cervantes’ character, who nostalgically conforms to the norms of the antiquated system of chivalry. Chesterton would continue to explore the paradoxes of Quixote and develop his mythic understanding throughout his life.

Chesterton elaborated further on his understanding of the meaning of the Quixote myth in another *Daily News* piece, focusing this time on Cervantes at the battle of Lepanto. “The True Romance” ran in 1911, pre-dating publication of “Lepanto” by several months. As Coates notes, both the essay’s form and content parallel the narration of the battle in “Lepanto,” making it a helpful companion piece to trace out the themes Chesterton intended to convey through his poetry (Coates 108). While arguing again for the typological significance of *Don Quixote*, Chesterton also articulated a growing appreciation for the irony of Cervantes’ work: “There is in

it a certain noble irony... which goes down to the very roots of Christianity.”¹⁶ Chesterton also articulated the premise that would underlie “Lepanto.” The 1571 clash of European and Turkish navies fundamentally resisted reduction to worldly calculations of power politics. It could only be understood as a metaphysical conflict, “a collision of strong creeds (22).” Humanity in every age regresses to tyranny and has “always felt slavery” of the weak by the strong “to be a natural and even a monotonous thing” (20), Chesterton saw the rescue of the Christian galley-slaves as a type of the redemption achieved in the Incarnation, the restoration of ineradicable individual dignity in the face of oppressive impersonal systems. Like the poem, the essay concludes with the sad smile of Cervantes, which Coates interprets as stemming not from confidence in “a simple sense of power,” like the Sultan’s, but from joy at the “touching and vulnerable as well as triumphant” victory, reflecting the “improbable revival of chivalry in a world grown cold and weary” (Coates 110). The quest of Quixote flies in the face of cynical calculations of power. It does not reject the crusading ebullience of Don John, but stands apart from it.

At this pre-War stage in Chesterton’s articulation of the Don Quixote myth, he was constructing a relatively simple typology. Though appreciating the ironic quality of Cervantes’ anti-hero, Chesterton did not yet focus on the possibilities of Quixotic imagery for memoirists of war. What he did already share ~~with~~ the eventual themes of the trench poets was a concern with the recovery of individuality in the face of deterministic, impersonal forces. Both the ideologies surrounding the war and the lived experience of the trenches seemed to reduce individual human beings to components in a vast, callous scheme. Barbara Tuchman, in her history of the outbreak of war, *The Guns of August*, points to two books sketching opposite theories of warfare, *The Great Illusion* (1910) and *Germany and the Next War* (1911), that were

¹⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors*. Ed. Dorothy Collins. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953). “The True Romance,” p. 20, hereafter cited parenthetically.

enormously influential in the years immediately leading up to 1914. Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* demonstrated that "war had become unprofitable," and that therefore "no nation would be so foolish as to start one."¹⁷ As reprehensibly determinist as Chesterton found Angell's optimistic liberal prophecies to be, he rejected the doctrinaire conservatism of German General Friedrich von Bernhardi's *Germany and the Next War* even more forcefully.¹⁸ Applying Social Darwinism to military theory, Bernhardi argued that war was "a biological necessity," fulfilling a "natural law" of "struggle for existence," that must inevitably be carried out by the German state.¹⁹

Not only did intellectuals theorize the War in terms of vast world-historical forces, ignoring the role of individuals' decisions, but bureaucrats treated the men at the front as quantities to be manipulated. The trench poets particularly resented the Field Service Post Card, a fill-in-the-blanks form letter designed to reassure concerned family members in as banal and uncommunicative a fashion as possible. Fussell points out that Wilfred Owen parodied the post card's "brassy self-sufficiency, as well as its implications about the uniform identity of human creatures" in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon (Fussell 185). Its "dehumanized, automated communication" seemed to deny the possibility of any self-disclosure through writing (186). In an Orwellian bit of logic, "the perversion of a fully flexible humane rhetoric betokened by the post card" supposedly reassured the human individual "that we are all interchangeable parts, and that so long as we embrace that fact, our world will be fairly satisfactory and even cheerful" (187). Chesterton's early concern with Quixote as a romantic figure who reasserts the value of

¹⁷ Tuchman, Barbara. *The Guns of August*. (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 10.

¹⁸ Cf. Chesterton's disparaging remark in the preface to his *The Crimes of England*. Authorama: Public Domain Books. <<http://www.authorama.com/crimes-of-england-1.html>> Accessed July 16, 2014.

¹⁹ Quoted in Tuchman, p. 11.

immanent human choice over abstraction thus anticipated a theme of trench poetry that would develop into modernist anxiety over the possibility of self-communication.

In his post-War development of the Quixote myth, Chesterton would offer his fellow memoirists striving to make sense of their wartime experience an example of the continued relevance of traditional myths. For the disillusioned characters in his later novel *The Return of Don Quixote*, drafted over a 15-year period spanning the War (1911-26), Quixote does more than serve as a model of dreamy nostalgia. Quixote comes to herald a new revelation, with his story a new Gospel, indispensable good news for post-War man to make sense of his trauma. Again, this may seem like a willful appropriation, even misreading, of Cervantes' novel. The hero of the original *Don Quixote* does not receive an external, revelatory call to set out on his quest; he actually contrives his entire adventure to satisfy his restlessness. Don Quixote is also not obviously a friend of orthodox Christianity: his books of chivalry are burned and his ideas censured by the local Catholic clergy. Yet Chesterton consistently interpreted Quixote as a paradoxically Christological figure who manages to balance an utter loyalty to chivalric idealism with a concomitant acknowledgment of the inevitably chastened, ironic quality of ideals in lived human experience. Coates, analyzing Chesterton's interpretation of Cervantes, traces it to weighting Part I of *Don Quixote* more heavily than Part II. Coates assesses this as a "probably partial and dubious reading," but argues that Chesterton had distilled from the original text a "philosophic understanding of a myth that he felt represented a fundamental truth about man and life" (Coates 99). Chesterton's sweeping ambition included an endeavor to re-write modernism's self-understanding through offering his age a new version of an old myth.

What renders *The Return of Don Quixote* a unique comment on Chesterton's times? If it were simply a diatribe against secularized modernity and a call for a return to orthodoxy, *The*

Return would be no subtler than a reactionary sermon. But the polyvalence of the mythologized image of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza renders the novel a deeply sophisticated response to the discourses of disillusionment in the trench poetry. The most influential trench poets' memoirs were first being read at the same time as *The Return: Sassoon's Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* were both published in 1928. In "Lepanto," Chesterton had associated Don Quixote with the reflection of the wounded Cervantes. *The Return* now includes the entire English nation, suffering collective post-War disillusionment and rocked by political upheaval, in the endeavor to make mythic sense of trauma. Having established these high stakes, Chesterton focuses on the Quixote tale as a quest myth, a journey in which the path stretches away, forward, and outward; the novel climaxes with the image of a modern Don Quixote and Sancho Panza riding forth to right wrongs. Calling this concluding vision of Quixote a "revelation," Chesterton underlines the objective exteriority of the call to quest. No internal or sentimental interpretation, he implies, can do justice to the authoritative, divinely-spoken summons. Chesterton thus recasts not only the trench poets' emerging paradigm of memoir-creation, but implicitly expresses a novel view of selfhood relevant to all of society. The Quixotic self assimilates the war's lessons of irony but refuses to reject the possibility of heroic agency entirely. Quixote may be the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, but he is no passive victim.

Diagnosing the Therapeutic Self in War Memoir

Chesterton's understanding of revelation is what sets *The Return* apart from the therapeutic self-conception of the remembering warrior in the trench poets' memoirs. Harari's analysis of the war memoir as a genre helpfully explicates the relationship between revelation,

authorship, and self-conception. In *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture*, Harari further develops the brief argument of his essay “Martial Illusions.” Harari defines “the revelatory interpretation of war” as the twentieth-century assumption that experiencing warfare provides privileged, immediate access to truths about the human experience: “War experiences reveal the truth precisely by blowing apart all cultural constructions.”²⁰ Peacetime seems artificial by comparison to the unique authenticity of wartime. War is conceived of as absolute *experience*—the sensory overstimulation of subjection to events far beyond the individual soldier’s ken or control. The cultural authority the modern West has granted to the reminiscences of veterans from World War I onwards stems from deference to the intense privation and exposure of the warrior’s body. Readers trust the memoirists as supremely reliable witnesses because they “have learned their wisdom with their flesh” (7). The meaning of the experience of combat does not lie in its objectivity or its world-historical significance, but in its radical interiority.

The memoirist therefore develops the paradoxical impulse to draw attention to the incommunicability of the story even while narrating it: “A flesh-witness can never really transmit her knowledge to other people—she cannot really describe what she witnessed, and the audience cannot really understand. Consequently even after repeated usage of her authority, a flesh-witness continues to enjoy a privileged authority to speak *and judge* what she witnessed” (7; emphasis in original). Authoring the memoir then becomes more about the author’s self-articulation—and possibly self-diagnosis—than it is about a genuine endeavor to communicate truth. And the memoir’s claim to be ‘revelation’ does not actually constitute the assertion of ontological authority that revelation connotes in the context of Abrahamic religion. As Harari

²⁰ Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture*, 1450-2000. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 20, hereafter cited parenthetically.

uses the word, “Revelation denotes a particular *method* for gaining knowledge rather than a particular type of knowledge” (10). The recipients of revelation therefore become, rather than prophets, victims suffering knowledge violently thrust upon them. Seeking knowledge is no longer an agentive, heroic quest. Not only do memoirs in this genre recast the soldier from hero to victim, but they ultimately undercut even the authority of authorship itself.

Harari essentially presents war memoir as a form of self-therapy for veteran-victims processing trauma. This analysis connects to a larger tradition in twentieth-century conceptualizations of the relationship between identity and authorship. Saler argues that the proliferation of myths in the twentieth century fundamentally empowered the individual to define his or her own boundaries between fiction and reality. But Marxist social critics have repeatedly noted that the art of capitalistic societies portrays individuals alienated from collective meanings as a consequence of consumerist logic. A parallel tradition, also responding to Max Weber on the disenchantment of the modern world, connects secularity to individualism. As the plausibility of orthodox religious belief breaks down, the human psyche shifts from being conceived of as the active center of a cosmic drama between damnation and beatitude to become the passive recipient of experience. Aspects of this modern self’s consciousness are not virtues or vices but therapeutic issues to be resolved into subjective well-being. Therefore, what the self communicates reflects only its own psychological state, not any objective meaning.

Three social critics from the late twentieth century who respond to this ethos of introspective individuality help to illuminate all that is at stake for selfhood in the quest narratives of *The Return of Don Quixote*. Chesterton’s critique of modern individualism shares much with their analysis and in some cases directly shaped it. In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (1966), Philip Rieff offers an overarching framework for

the emergence of the psychologized understanding of the self. He notes that all human societies have needed some edifice of compelling, common norms capable of “directing the self outward” to self-realize in contributing to the collective.²¹ The kind of self that turns inward, that goes on no adventures, therefore poses a difficulty for the social order. He notes that literary myths can inspire self-transcendence, but that the therapeutic self is largely inured to literature’s power because it does not feel inadequate and accepts no external authority. Rieff defines the therapeutic self as not looking beyond itself for salvation: “Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased” (24-5). He describes literature as drifting away from a vocabulary of good and evil, and therefore losing any ability to communicate tragedy. Each author, restless to portray his or her own psyche’s experience as absolutely unique, neglects to attempt to convey universal meanings. Rieff’s analysis resembles Harari’s on the memoirs of incommunicable revelation.

For Rieff, this privileging of subjective, present well-being not only undermines orthodox religion and mythic literature: the therapeutic self cannot be a hero or an idealist. “Men may have gone too far, beyond the old deception of good and evil, to specialize at last, wittingly, in techniques that are to be called, in the present volume, ‘therapeutic,’ with nothing at stake beyond a manipulatable sense of well-being” (13). The turn from the Victorian discourses of heroism to modernist cynicism via the disillusionment of the War represents essentially a lowering of the horizons, a reduction of the stakes implicit in human deeds. Chesterton would have seen this evacuation of the heroic ethos, the abandonment of striving against evil and for good in his contemporaries’ literary imagination, in theological terms. With nothing

²¹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 4, hereafter cited parenthetically.

fundamentally wrong with the human condition, man needs, not salvation from his sinful self, but psychological adjustment.

Christopher Lasch's seminal study of the late-twentieth-century United States *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979) applies Rieff's conceptual categories to literature. Lasch notes that therapeutic culture not only gives no purchase to moral language or religious truth claims, but that it even re-frames political ideology as a means of finding psychological adjustment. This lowering of the horizons renders idealism incomprehensible and even suspect as a source of restlessness rather than the desired "peace of mind."²² Traditional language becomes evacuated of any content apart from its impact on the individual's psyche, with even such potent terms as "love" and "meaning" reduced from intrinsically valuable ends to instrumentally useful means to emotional health. This self-referential posture inevitably fosters cynicism towards heroic tropes in literature.

Lasch complements Harari in tracing the implications of this psycho-therapeutic self-understanding for autobiographical writing. He describes a "confessional mode" (16) in contemporary memoirs that become trapped in self-consciousness of their own psychiatric quality. Where Harari traces war memoirists in the early twentieth century as shifting from seeing themselves as heroes and authors to victims, Lasch extends this insight to memoir more broadly. Self-narration has become a therapeutic exercise. Confessional works claim to attempt to communicate "hard-won personal revelation" (18). But, just as in Harari, this revelation is not the declaration of eternal verity. Stemming from the experience of inner trauma, it is ultimately incommunicable. Lasch describes the memoirist's "pseudo-insight into his own condition, usually expressed in psychiatric clichés" (19) as ultimately self-serving, a parody of confession's

²² Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Norton: New York, 1979, p. 13, hereafter cited parenthetically.

traditional meaning: honest self-disclosure before an objective standard of external truth. If this dynamic is taken to its logical conclusion, any unified self-understanding can disintegrate in layers of self-conscious self-presentation, and “the record of the inner life becomes an unintentional parody of inner life” (20). The coherent author interpreting past choices into a linear story has dissolved into the victim of disjointed experiences in search of a reassuring narrative.

Lasch’s description of “confessional” literature that is incapable of genuine self-disclosure parallels Harari’s analysis of veteran memoirists’ “revelations” that reveal no truth beyond personal experience. Craig Gay, in his sociology of religion *The Way of the (Modern) World*, cites Chesterton as one of many thinkers concerned with the recovery of authentic selfhood. Gay draws on both Rieff and Lasch to examine the therapeutic self in the context of the history of secularization, and echoes them in seeing “a fundamental narrowing of human aspirations.”²³ Not only does heroism become inconceivable in a therapeutic culture, but religious devotion becomes intelligible only as a means to the end of subjective self-acceptance. But the absolute claims of historic orthodoxy refuse to be assessed based only on their psychological effect on the individual. Gay lays out this antithesis: while Christianity seeks “*self-transcendence*,” the “therapeutic disposition” seeks only “self-development,” leaving the individual essentially autonomous (186; emphasis in original). With *The Return of Don Quixote*, Chesterton aimed to render plausible the possibility of self-transcendence for his post-War readers. Gay explains that the self can only be defined or understood when called from without: “The dignity of the human person, understood Christianly, lies in ‘response-ability,’ in the possibility of freely and consciously giving oneself in love to God and to one’s neighbor” (187).

²³ Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Didn’t Exist*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 185, hereafter cited parenthetically.

Thus, answering the call of revelation provides an external reference point to anchor selfhood, preventing the collapse into self-construction that Lasch identifies in confessional literature. Chesterton was himself deeply invested in the process of coming to understand a traumatic experience through self-narration. He did assume that faith would prove psychologically salutary, but only because it was first objectively true. Gay explains that historic Christianity does offer “resurrection,” healing for body and soul, but these benefits only flow from accepting the call of faith on its own terms (188). The conclusion of *The Return of Don Quixote* offers the Quixote myth as a new revelation for the post-War era, an invitation to the therapeutic self to conceive of being called outwards.

The Revelation of *The Return*

A decade and a half after publishing “Lepanto,” Chesterton revisited the Quixote myth in his aptly-named novel *The Return of Don Quixote*. Initially published in serial form in Chesterton’s own magazine, *G.K.’s Weekly*, in 1925-6, *The Return* was released as a volume in 1927 (Coates 115). Chesterton’s dedication explained that he had begun to draft *The Return*, his “parable for social reformers,” “long before the War” and now believed it had proved itself “a quite unintentional prophecy.”²⁴ This drawn-out publication allowed Chesterton to engage in retrospection and self-criticism. Ian Boyd, in *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton*, judges *The Return* to reflect the maturation of its author: “the culmination of Chesterton’s fiction,” it is “perhaps the best and most interesting of his novels.”²⁵ The subtlety and irony with which Chesterton treated Quixotic heroism in this late, mature work would not have been possible in the pre-War years when he published “Lepanto” and “The True Romance”—the years that Coates characterizes as

²⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *The Return of Don Quixote*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927), “To W.R. Titterton.”

²⁵ Boyd, Ian. *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton: A Study in Art and Propaganda*. Harper & Row: London, 1975, p. 116.

the “Quixote period” when the myth most guided Chesterton’s thought (Coates 111). Reflecting on those years meant recalling the boyish idealism that led Chesterton, like so many others, to respond with patriotic enthusiasm to the war’s outbreak. It also meant grieving, remembrance, and self-narrativizing to account for his personal loss as well as the nation’s: his brother, Cecil Chesterton, had served in France and died of disease just weeks after the Armistice. Yet while *The Return* to some extent resembles other memoirs of the War, it transcends Harari’s pattern of therapeutic introspection. The tale begins with a group of characters struggling to find collective meaning in the recovery of medieval mythology, and then focuses on their violent disillusionment. Their sense of irony grows, but eventually combines with the preservation of a heroic self-understanding to produce a wistful, tragicomic finale. Chesterton’s disenchantment gives rise to re-enchantment.

The Return’s plot serves as a retrospective self-critique, striving to preserve faith in ideals despite the danger of their perversion ideology. In the mid-1920s, Chesterton feared that ideologues would take advantage of national disillusionment and was understandably concerned to speak to the political situation.²⁶ But in addition to its topical concerns, *The Return* offers a searching commentary on war memoir as a genre, and, more broadly, on the role of myth in modernity. The setting is the aristocratic Seawood Abbey, where the heiress Rosamund Severne has gathered her friends. They share a discontent with the *status quo* of post-War industrial capitalism and disenchanted modernity, but their visions for England’s way forward each prove incomplete and impracticable. Rosamund’s best friend, the understated and introspective Olive Ashley, was brought up by her Pre-Raphaelite father. She longs to recover a particular red pigment used in medieval illuminated manuscripts, introducing the element of reactionary

²⁶ The scale of the General Strike of 1926, ongoing while *The Return* was being serialized, stirred fears of left-wing subversion throughout England, while Fascism’s rise to power on the Continent highlighted the danger of reactionary populist movements.

romanticism that runs throughout *The Return*. Douglas Murrel is an effete, over-educated cynic who nevertheless allows himself to be persuaded to seek the paint for Ashley. Michael Herne, the weedy librarian, falls in love with a romanticized notion of medieval kingship found in his books. Three chivalric quests run through the action of the novel. The first is a fictional one, represented in Ashley's play "Blondel the Troubadour," which the guests perform as a private entertainment. Boyd comments that the play "presents the essential action of the novel in miniature"; this meta-poetic drama reveals Chesterton's central concern with artistic representation as a means to self-understanding.²⁷ When the romantic vision of the play is disrupted, Murrel and Herne both respond to disillusionment by setting out on actual quests of their own.

The narrator explicitly summarizes "Blondel the Troubadour" as a derivative and unimaginative work of indulgent nostalgia. Set during Richard the Lionheart's captivity on his return from the Third Crusade, it concerns the eponymous hero's quest throughout Europe for the restoration of his king. The climactic scene has Richard, finally back on the throne, abdicate power denouncing "the disgusting condition of political affairs generally."²⁸ He eschews public life for private pastoral, living carefree in the forest with his bride. The performance of the "Blondel" play, with Herne as King Richard, proves enormously successful. Herne so entirely comes to inhabit his part that he begins to long to recreate the medieval world. He succeeds in gathering a following dedicated to re-infusing pageantry and hierarchy into modern England, essentially expanding the world of the original play to include the whole country. This "League of the Lion" proclaims a "New Regime": "The astonished citizen was informed that England had now reached a crisis in which moral courage alone could save her" (188). For Herne, discerning

²⁷ Boyd, *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton*, p. 120.

²⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Return of Don Quixote*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927), p. 86, hereafter cited parenthetically.

representation from reality has become impossible. Resembling Cervantes' Don Quixote at his most self-deludingly chivalric, he can no longer distinguish actor and role: "He had forced all his commonplace companions back into their masquerade clothes and compelled them to play the masque until they died" (200-1). Chesterton describes the pageantry of the New Regime as feeding off "the hunger of a populace... so long starved for the feast of the eyes and the fancy" (197). But Herne's sincere love for the myth of medieval kingship makes him a useful pawn for the conservative government, which infiltrates his pageant as way to entrap and crack down on their radical opponents. Art not only fails to create the world anew, but "Blondel the Troubadour" becomes degraded into propaganda.

Chesterton's verdict on this, the first quest of the novel, explicitly highlights the disillusionment of post-War literature: "Such was the play of 'Blondel the Troubadour,' not altogether a bad specimen of the sentimental and old-fashioned romance, popular before the war, but now only remembered because of the romantic results which it afterwards produced in real life" (87). Chesterton highlights the irony of those "romantic results." Can the heroic mythology of medieval romance be anything but an empty mockery in the age of Sassoon and Blunden? The political disaster that follows from the performance of "Blondel the Troubadour" apparently underlines the danger of conflating romance and reality. The disillusionment born from the co-opting of an anachronistic mythology for sordid political ends parallels what many post-War British writers felt about the use of the propaganda they had helped produce during the War. Chesterton himself never flagged in his support for the British cause. Propaganda coordinator Charles Masterman congratulated him in 1917 for tirelessly making the case that "we have to continue to fight on in spite of war-weariness and losses and misery and faintheartedness."²⁹

²⁹ Charles Masterman to G.K. Chesterton. "16th June 1917." Add. MS 73238, ff. 177-8. Western Manuscripts Collection. British Library. London, UK.

Looking back at the end of his life, in his *Autobiography*, Chesterton said, “I thought and think that Prussian militarism and materialism should not dominate Europe.”³⁰ Yet in the passages of *The Return* lamenting the degradation of art, Chesterton seems to express regret for taking part in propaganda. It is left to two other quests to redeem the disillusionment of “Blondel the Troubadour.”

Whereas “Blondel the Troubadour” is consciously contrived for entertainment, effectively as a therapeutic exercise for the guests at Seawood Abbey, Douglas Murrel ventures forth to recover Olive Ashley’s paints. Chester portrays his quest as more authentically in the spirit of medieval romance because it is a response to an external call. Setting out alone, Murrel resembles Cervantes’ Don Quixote on his first sally, before Sancho Panza joins him. Chesterton applies to Murrel the paradoxes of medievalism and modernity, romance and irony, that he associates with Don Quixote:

Something childish in his memories awoke; and he could almost have fancied that he was a fairy prince and his clumsy walking-stick was a sword. Then he remembered that his enterprise was not to take him into forests and valleys but into the labyrinth of commonplace and cockney towns; and his plain and pleasant and shrewd face was wrinkled with a laugh of irony. (100-1)

Murrel’s smile recalls that of Cervantes on the deck in “Lepanto.” Yet his quest proves unexpectedly successful. The paint Ashley wants has been driven off the market by the machinations of monopolistic corporations. Hendry, the sole craftsman alive who knows the secret of producing it, languishes in poverty, abandoned by all but his faithful daughter, and a bureaucratic agent of the state is about to have the old man labeled a lunatic and carted away in the name of social welfare. Murrel succeeds in humiliating the overbearing social worker, ending the process of institutionalization on a technicality, and buying a hansom cab to take Hendry to safety. Along the way, he wins the love of Hendry’s daughter. Murrel the cynic, the character

³⁰ Chesterton, G.K.. *Autobiography*. Fisher Press: Sevenoaks, 1992, p. 252.

naturally least sympathetic to neo-medieval romanticism, has unwittingly lived the ancient pattern of the quest-narrative to right the wrongs of modern industry and government.

The theme of disillusionment and re-mythologizing then comes to the fore in the climactic scene when Herne sees through the myths of *The League of the Lion*. Murrel returns to Seawood Abbey and tells the story of his quest, and Herne recognizes in it an authentic heroism that his whole charade of a pageant has lacked. He searches for a new narrative to make sense of both the experience of trauma and the continued sense of individual agency. Herne thus resembles the idealistic recruits of 1914 after their encounter with the reality of trench warfare. The old chivalric myths, along with the sense of camaraderie in collective action, shatter. He has to completely re-write his own narrative to make sense of the tragedy in which he has played such a prominent role. At first, he takes refuge in a radical individualism, rejecting all collectivity and systematic political thought as inescapably corrupt. He then impulsively decides to take up the Quixote myth as a way to abandon politics while retaining his romantic ideals: “‘I will go forth as a real outlaw,’ he said, ‘and as men do robbery on the highway I will do right on the highway; and it will be counted a wilder crime’” (275). Like Don Quixote, Herne finds the cynical world unworthy of his romance; Cervantes’ and Chesterton’s protagonists are both chronologically displaced, alienated from their ages.

And yet Herne’s renunciation of the world does not reflect the attempt at self-therapy of a lonely, modernist individual. Unlike the alienated trench poets he otherwise so much resembles, and unlike Harari and Lasch’s memoirists, Herne continues to hope for a relationship beyond the self, for a mutuality of self-knowledge. Chesterton develops his previous treatments of the Quixote myth to center the tale’s meaning on the growing friendship between Don Quixote and

Sancho Panza. Herne sets forth with Murrel in the hansom cab from the previous quest. Sancho Panza and Don Quixote unite and recognize their shared story:

“Don’t you know me?” asked Murrel. “Don’t you know my name? Well, perhaps you don’t know my real name.”

“What do you mean?” asked Herne.

“My name,” said the other, “is Sancho Panza.” (276)

This exchange renders their quest intrinsically reciprocal, a striving for self-knowledge through other-knowledge. Murrel and Herne are each the servant, each the master, and both friends. Herne declares to his friend, ““You did not bother about systems [in setting out on the quest]... It is you who lead and I who follow. You are not Sancho Panza. You are the other”” (293). They interchange identities, sharing their new-found ability to defy alienation.

Together, Herne and Murrel reaffirm their faith in heroism, but only at a face-to-face scale. Though mythic ideals can be twisted into political propaganda, knight and squire can right wrongs through personal acts of generosity. And it is only through answering this external call to enter into the story of Quixote that Herne and Murrel gain a true sense of self. Chesterton’s critique of modernity seeks to replace the therapeutic self with a self-understanding simultaneously modern and traditional, ironic and heroic. The matured Don Quixote myth represents for Chesterton a rich set of paradoxes in which ontologically different categories can merge while each remaining fully themselves. Chesterton underlines the victory of Herne and Murrel over alienation, completing the plot with marriage. Murrel returns to the scene of his first quest to marry Hendry’s daughter, and Herne proposes to Rosamund. Tragedy has turned to comedy and produced a new beginning. The vision for renewal in *The Return*’s ending is imbued with irony, but it holds out hope for suffering memoirists to find their own experience’s meaning in a pre-existing story.

In this novel of dis- and re-enchantment, the mythic image of Quixote preserves its pre-War valence for Chesterton of ironic Christian chivalry. But fifteen years on from “Lepanto,” *The Return* expounds much further on the chastened ambiguities of Cervantes’ smile. Herne and Murrel resemble memoirists, seeking to assimilate the experience of past traumas into their self-conception. Yet Chesterton decisively repudiates the narcissistic, incommunicable interiority that Lasch and Harari identify as features of the confessional memoir. An omniscient and ironic third-person narrator self-consciously displays his authority over the story with a direct address to “the long-suffering reader” (84). This effectively asserts, against other modernists, the continued possibility of interpreting experience into a meaningful history and communicating objective truth. Harari’s memoirists turn inwards, relinquishing authorship for victimhood. But *The Return* holds out hope for the individual, even in a traumatized nation, to find Gay’s cure for the therapeutic self: the “response-ability” of being called outwards (and backwards) to an ironic iteration of a romantic revelation. From the dedication of *The Return*, Chesterton claims to have written a “parable” that summons the reader to respond to its “prophecy.”

Chesterton goes so far as to suggest that the “parable” of Quixote constitutes a new revelation for the post-War era. The Quixote myth here is no longer merely the intriguing Christological image of “The Divine Parody” or “Lepanto.” The chastened wisdom born of hard experience contributes to a sadness that permeates even the triumph of Quixote at the end of *The Return*. Chesterton does not fundamentally reject the possibility of chivalric combat but he acknowledges how remote such tropes seem from real-world decision-making. The companions set out on their quest surrounded with prophetic, even apocalyptic, imagery:

Like a revelation of lightning, in the instant before annihilating laughter came down like night, those who saw it saw a vision and a memory, bright and brittle as an instant’s resurrection of the dead. The bones of the gaunt, high-featured face, the flame-like fork of the beard, the hollow and almost frantic eyes, were in a setting that startled with

recognition; rigid above the saddle of Rosinante, tall in tattered arms he lifted that vain lance that for three hundred years has taught us nothing but to laugh at the shaking of a spear. And behind him rose a vast yawning shadow like the very vision of that leviathan of laughter; the grotesque cab like the jaws of a derisive dragon pursuing him forever, as the vast shadow of caricature pursues our desperate dignity and beauty, hanging above him for ever threatening like the wave of the world. (277-8)

The majesty of the moment is immediately ironized—Herne in his medieval garb with Murrel astride the hansom cab is pitiable and easily mocked. But they reveal something of the “desperate dignity and beauty” of clinging to ideals in a cynical world. It is a humble vision of heroism founded on a deliberately improbable hope.

By calling this vision of the questers’ exit a “revelation of lightning,” Chesterton claims that his characters’ choice to self-narrativize through the Don Quixote myth is no merely therapeutic exercise. If their quest is both “a vision and a memory,” anticipating and recalling the “resurrection of the dead,” it provides a glimpse into the transcendent reality of the eschaton. Pointing back to “The Divine Parody of *Don Quixote*,” Coates notes that already in that early essay Chesterton saw in the clash between the would-be knight-errant’s absolute, unadulterated ideals and the cynical pragmatism of the inn-keeper a picture of the perennial human condition (Coates 99). That duality, together with his concern for the continued possibility of self-disclosure, made Chesterton focus on both Sancho Panza and Don Quixote as together essential to articulating the paradox’s meaning. In Chesterton’s theological paradigm, if man is both soul and body, both *imago dei* and originally sinful, he will always feel torn between the world as it ought to be and the messy ambiguities of lived experience. The pageant of Herne and Murrel expresses this perennial paradox of human glory and fragility. And the image they create together points simultaneously backward and forward: Chesterton sees the combination of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote as expressing the simultaneous divinity and humanity in the hypostatic union of the incarnation. The Quixote myth is no longer an incidental type of divine

history, but a rich archetype in itself, essential to the restoration of the alienated individuals traumatized by the War. This relational, dynamic, ironic yet heroic, traditional yet ever-modern myth sounds the call to move beyond a therapeutic understanding of literature and life.

Bridging the Edwardians and Modernists: Kilmer and Chesterton

Answering that call himself, Chesterton offered the new revelation of Quixote to his fellow memoirists to weave their own stories around. Though Chesterton's poetics distinguish him from most of his fellow modernists, he found a disciple in one trench poet, Joyce Kilmer, a New Jersey-born Catholic convert who became a national hero in the United States after his death in battle at the Second Battle of the Marne. Now chiefly remembered for the saccharine early poem "Trees," Kilmer might have contributed to Chesterton's renewed mythology had he lived to reflect on his experience of the War. Kilmer knew Chesterton personally through regular travel to Britain and in 1911 sent his first book of poetry, *Summer of Love*, "To Gilbert Keith Chesterton with sincere admiration."³¹ Chesterton also received a personal copy of Annie Kilburn Kilmer's *Memoirs of My Son Sergeant Joyce Kilmer*, a collection of letters and reminiscences. In his letters home, Kilmer repeatedly praised Chesterton's fiction and his magazine, *The Eye-Witness*, expressing hopes of contributing to it.³² In his correspondence with his confessor, Fr. James Daly, S.J., Kilmer repeatedly highlighted Chesterton's influence on his own literary craft. In one pre-War letter, apparently responding to Daly's criticism of Chesterton, Kilmer concedes that his English mentor's recent output has declined in quality, but he applies to Chesterton the Quixotic imagery of renewed heroism: "He is the plumed knight of literature with

³¹ Joyce Kilmer, *Summer of Love* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Company, 1911). G.K. Chesterton Library. GKC.1.KIL, C. 86, autograph, inside cover.

³² Cf. Annie Kilburn Kilmer, *Memories of My Son Sergeant Joyce Kilmer* (New York: Brentano's, 1920), pp. 75, 76, 77, 139.

the sword of wit and the burnished shield of Faith. Let him sleep awhile. When the bugle blows we'll see him in the lists again."³³

But Kilmer did more than hold up Chesterton as an inspiration: his own interpretation of the experience of war reflected the Quixotic spirit of ironic heroism. In one of Kilmer's last letters to Daly, from April 8, 1918, he writes, "I am having a delightful time, but it won't break my heart for the war to end," mixing chivalric cheer with a wry acknowledgement of his suffering.³⁴ His essay "Holy Ireland," written early in 1918 and set at Christmastime 1917, tells the story of his squad's welcome to a French peasant family's home. Their hostess, a resiliently cheerful widow, becomes the true war hero among all the soldiers present. As the Americans close the evening singing "The Star Spangled Banner" and "La Marseillaise," Kilmer shifts the focus away from the patriotic triumphalism of the music to the ironic, yet more deeply noble, courage of the widow:

During the final stanza Madame did not sing. She leaned against the great family bedstead and looked at us. She had taken one of the babies from under the red comforter and held him to her breast. One of her red and toil-scarred hands half covered his fat little back. There was a gentle dignity about that plain, hard-working woman, that soldier's widow—we all felt it. And some of us saw the tears in her eyes.³⁵

Here, the figure of Madame represents both an innocent victim of war's collateral damage, and yet a modern Madonna. She cannot join in to sing the empty words of patriotic bombast, but she renews the courage of the fighting men. Madame expresses simultaneously disillusionment with received mythology and a renewed mythic heroism, paralleling the function for Chesterton of Don Quixote.

³³ Joyce Kilmer to James Daly. "April 27, 1913." Series 1, Box 1, Collection 1. Joyce Kilmer and Kilmer Family Records, 1909-1975. Joyce Kilmer/Campion College Collection. Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

³⁴ Joyce Kilmer to James Daly. "April 8, 1918." Series 1, Box 1, Collection 1. Joyce Kilmer and Kilmer Family Records, 1909-1975. Joyce Kilmer/Campion College Collection. Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

³⁵ Christopher Morley, ed. *Modern Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921; Joyce Kilmer, "Holy Ireland." Bartleby.com, 2000. <www.bartleby.com/237/>. Accessed April 4th, 2015.

In *The Outlook* of 23 July 1919, in a memorial titled “Joyce Kilmer, Poet and Patriot,” Katherine Brégy noted this Chestertonian ethos in Kilmer’s craft and life. Kilmer was “the greatest American representative of that little band of ‘modern mediævalists’ which on the other side of the Atlantic included the Chestertons, Hilaire Belloc, and a group of younger singers—all sworn to recapture something of the robust faith, the fine fervor, and heroic folly of Merrie England.”³⁶ Brégy commended the paradoxical “practical idealism” that prompted Kilmer to substantiate his heroic rhetoric by volunteering when his country went to war (467). Kilmer “loved the fighting saints and the fighting poets,” and eschewed self-victimizing language in favor of portraying himself as called forth on a quest (468). Brégy explicitly notes the contrast between Kilmer and the better-known trench poets like Sassoon, commenting, “It is a hard thing for civilized man to live through bitter and unbelievable scenes without becoming bitter and unbelieving” (469). Kilmer, steeped in Chesterton’s Quixotic superimposition of idealism and irony, died un-embittered and believing. The short years of Kilmer’s career suggest the tantalizing possibility that an idealistic pre-War writer assimilating Quixotic heroism into his interpretation of soldiering could have contributed to an alternative poetics of Great War memoir.

Amid disaster and disbelief, Chesterton’s strove with his Don Quixote myth to reveal to modernism a renewed self. Thomas Hardy has been remembered as the one Edwardian ‘man of letters’ whose honesty about the tragedy of the human condition made him enduringly relevant for the generation who lived through the war and could no longer believe in the meliorist platitudes of the pre-War years. But Kilmer’s experience and works suggest otherwise that Chesterton bridged the Edwardian and modernist periods, seeing in Don Quixote a myth rich enough to express the War’s ironic disillusionment while simultaneously embracing re-

³⁶ Katharine Brégy. “Joyce Kilmer, Poet and Patriot.” *The Outlook* July 23, 1919: 467-9. <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/Outlook-1919jul23?View=PDF>> accessed July 16, 2014, p. 467, hereafter cited parenthetically.

enchantment. In Saler's terms, *The Return of Don Quixote*, along with the rest of Chesterton's Quixote corpus, functioned as an alternative myth for a period rife with literary attempts to make sense of having lived through the War. Chesterton recognized that he could never again enjoy the cultural authority of membership in the pre-war aristocracy of the men of letters. But he gave the marketplace of ideas a new take on a traditional myth. Cervantes himself mined the established tradition of romance to pioneer the new age of the novel with his protagonist, a bourgeois Renaissance Spaniard, learning to inhabit outmoded ways of life. Giving abandoned traditions a new body in the recovery of a 300-year-old myth was therefore Chesterton's own quixotic contribution to a renewed, modernist, post-War literature.

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