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“The Whole Green Theatre of that Swift and Inexplicable Tragedy”: Gardens in G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown Stories

Abstract

This paper provides a survey of garden settings in Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s detective stories about Father Brown, followed by more detailed readings of the first four of the stories, which introduce the clerical sleuth and his principal antagonists and establish the rules of Chesterton’s semiotics of the green theatre of crime.

Gardens with their different atmospheres are a favourite setting of crime in G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown stories.¹ This preference is highlighted by the second story of the whole collection, *The Secret Garden*, whose title and year of publication coincided with those of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s famous novel (the same year 1911 also saw the publication of yet another ‘garden story,’ *The Wonderful Garden* by Edith Nesbit).² Whereas Burnett’s *hortus* signifies chiefly new life, Chesterton’s gardens are more often the *mise en scène* of death, both literal and spiritual, though they too can witness a moral rebirth.³ A confined and seemingly secure place, like the house to which it is usually annexed, the garden provides a convenient yet shocking setting for crime, one which lends itself well to purposes of investigation while remaining widely evocative.⁴ Chesterton builds upon the archetypal symbolism of the garden: its beauty, innocence, and growth evoke paradise and apparently exclude the dirt and gore of crime, yet also remind us that sin started in Eden. A borderline space between Nature and Nurture, the garden is both a human and a divine provenance in Chesterton’s mysteries, making them more than a shallow form of popular entertainment and a purely commercial enterprise, as they have sometimes been described.⁵

1. Gardens and Englishness

In his mystery stories Chesterton utilises a great variety of gardens, illustrating the English mania for gardening, but also creating a particular atmosphere.⁶ He is fond of peculiar spatial arrangements, which would provide interesting crime scenes and help him convey additional commentary – cultural, moral, social, political, or religious.

Thus, *The Crime of the Communist* takes place, literally, “on the lawn of Mandeville garden” (717), at a fictional college which faithfully conveys the spirit of ancient English universities: the old Tudor arches “ran like a cloister round the College gardens,” which “had been tended so carefully as to achieve the final triumph of looking careless,” so that “the very flowers seemed beautiful by accident, like elegant weeds” (706). The late afternoon garden scenery stands in sharp contrast with the *rigor mortis*, which is how Father Brown describes the bodies of the two millionaires and would-be benefactors of the College, poisoned in their chairs on the lawn: “Somehow the rich sunlight and the coloured garden increased the creepy impression of a stiffly dressed doll; a marionette on an Italian stage” (707).

As the backdrop to the crime plot, Chesterton fondly recalls the Middle Ages, a time when the Gothic style flourished in architecture and when “the College had been founded [...] by Sir John Mandeville, for the encouragement of telling stories” (708). Chesterton prefers, over the modern Communists, “the more artistic and leisurely Socialists” of the type of William Morris (709) and praises the idea of a university, with its motto of “Not differing much, except in opinion” (709) and its ideal of fellowship. In the end it turns out that the Communist, though much criticised as the Professor of Theoretical Thieving, is not the assassin. While Father Brown exposes Capitalism as another political heresy, and the more dangerous one for being taken for granted, he argues that it is ultimately “the anti-Christian morality or immorality” (718), not a political view, that makes a murderer. The story conveys the spirit of an old Oxford college, and of England in general, where traditions like playing cricket and quaint customs like not smoking when drinking port after dinner would prevail even in a don with Communist sympathies.

The plot of *The Red Moon of Meru*, in turn, unfolds in the house of Lord and Lady Mounteagle, which was once an abbey, and centres in the cloister garden: “The cloister was on the usual plan, as regards its original structure, but the line of Gothic pillars and pointed arches that formed the inner square was linked together all along by a low wall, about waist high, turning the Gothic doors into Gothic windows and giving each a sort of flat window-sill of stone” (598). This detailed description is crucial for understanding how the precious ruby has been stolen, which is the principal mystery of the story, but it also gives Chesterton an opportunity to accuse the English Reformation of committing a greater theft:

“the priest’s finger was pointed to the Gothic outline of the great Abbey. ‘A great graven stone,’ he said, ‘and that was also stolen’” (606).

In addition, the story illustrates the difference between Christian and Eastern spirituality, the latter represented by “the lines and colours of Asiatic dragons or idols,” a modern decoration added to the cloister and sharply contrasting with its grey Gothic framework (598). Eastern spirituality is embodied especially in the statue of a great green god elevated in the middle of the cloister garden, and its chief worshipper, the man called the Master of the Mountain. Father Brown exposes him as caring solely for “spiritual powers,” while he himself has “much more sympathy with spiritual weaknesses” (595). Other differences include being, respectively, against and in favour of reason and being proud and ashamed of crime. “We, whose fathers at least were Christians,” argues the priest, “who have grown up under those medieval arches [...] we were all casting the crime from us like a snake,” whereas the Master of the Mountain “was actually luring it to him like a snake-charmer” (606). The actual robber is exonerated on account of being “an English gentleman” and “a Christian thief,” thus aware of the moral law and capable of repentance (606). The story points to the integrity of the English and more generally European tradition in the face of threats coming from the East.

2. Island Gardens

An island location is promising for the crime plot but also implies the view of England itself as a garden. In *The Sins of Prince Saradine*, the two detective protagonists and friends, Father Brown and Flambeau, travel in a boat down the little rivers of Norfolk, “delighting in the overhanging gardens and meadows” (117), before they arrive at their destination: a reed house on a reed island situated in the middle of one such river, as if in “fairyland” (118, 124), whose elfin beauty seems innocent to Flambeau, but sad and evil to Father Brown. The quaintness of the place is emphasised. The house, a long, low bungalow built of bamboo, though pretty and unique, is old, silent, and melancholy: it “stood with its back, as it were, to the river and the only landing-stage,” while “the main entrance was on the other side, and looked down the long island garden” (119). It is this island garden with a broken rose bush that will become the “green theatre” of a bloody family vendetta (128). The tragedy is enacted at sunset time, under “a dome of virgin gold” (127), a regular temporal setting of Chesterton’s garden mysteries, suggestive of a higher order and another world, where “retribution will come on the real offender” (124) with inevitable justice.

A river island setting, with an old wooden house in the style of Shakespeare’s England, hidden in thick foliage and surrounded by a grim park, appears as the background of an aristocratic family’s legends and feuds also in *The Perishing of the Pendragons*. Island gardens of this kind are both magically exotic as well as

useful in detective fiction for their double boundaries and the resulting sense of isolation conveniently delimit the space of crime and enhance horror. This particular story contains an excellent example of the symbolism of light and darkness, activated by Chesterton through the typical twilight settings of his stories, which as a rule take place just before or, as in this case, just after sunset: "They had reached that phase just after sunset when air and water both look bright, but earth and all its growing things look almost black by comparison" (277). The time of day sharpens the distinction between light and darkness and what they stand for, but also creates the sense of mystery, imbuing Chesterton's mystery stories with a deeper kind of mystery. In this particular story, the evening "was one of those rare atmospheres in which a smoked-glass slide seems to have been slid away from between us and Nature" (277). The exceptional clearness and intensity of colours has a quality of magic and makes Father Brown feel "something romantic and even secret in the very form of the landscape" (277).

3. Seashore Gardens

Another kind of water boundary, the sea, makes us think of England as an island, and one full of wonders, as it has been described by medieval writers from Bede to the *Gawain* poet. In *The Absence of Mr Glass*, a small garden is located at the back of a cottage on the North Sea, so that there is only a sandy beach and the sea behind it: "The scattered houses stood farther and farther apart in a broken string along the seashore; the afternoon was closing with a premature and partly lurid twilight; the sea was of an inky purple and murmuring ominously. In the scrappy back garden of the MacNabs which ran down towards the sand, two black, barren-looking trees stood up like demon hands held up in astonishment" (192). As a rule, a location like this gives rise to all sorts of speculation and is illustrative of the Gothic convention deployed in Chesterton's gardens,⁷ enhanced by the time setting of an afternoon that imperceptibly turns into evening and then to often stormy night, creating an eerie atmosphere and making people think of demons, goblins, fairies, ghosts, and so on as possible agents of crime.⁸

In this particular story the atmosphere of the place breeds all kinds of morbid fancies, particularly in the mind of the young daughter of the house: "the room was darkening, the sea-blighted boughs of the garden trees looked leaner and blacker than ever, yet they seem to have come nearer to the window. One could almost fancy they were sea-monsters like krakens or cuttlefish, writhing polypi who had crawled up from the sea to see the end of this tragedy, even as he, the villain and victim of it, the terrible man in the tall hat, had once crawled up from the sea" (195). Even the rational Dr Hood speculates that the corpse of the wretched Mr Glass "may be hidden in the garden or stuffed up the chimney" (195). In fact, as Father Brown unravels the mystery, it turns out that there was no murder at all,

that the supposed suspect and victim was really a professional conjurer practising his tricks, and that his very name was the product of the girl's aural illusion.

Another location by the sea occurs in *The Oracle of the Dog*, where a rich resident of Cranston on the coast of Yorkshire is stabbed to death in his own summer-house, "standing at the extreme end of the garden, where there is no exit or entrance of any kind" (379), only a hedge dividing the garden from the beach and the overhanging Rock of Fortune. This location gives rise to the apparently insoluble mystery of the Colonel's murder, until Father Brown points out that a summer-house is not like a sealed chamber with impenetrable walls and deduces how the stabbing was committed from behind and from the beach by means of a long blade. An important clue, when interpreted sensibly by the priest, is the seemingly strange behaviour of the dog.

Chesterton again uses here a strategy characteristic of his type of mystery: he creates an atmosphere that encourages irrational explanations to introduce Father Brown and his rational solution. The young man narrating the story is particularly prone to fancy: "I went down that old garden again, and I knew there was something new and unnatural about it besides the murder. The flowers still tossed about in blue masses on each side of the black entrance into the old grey summer-house; but to me the blue flowers [delphiniums] looked like blue devils dancing before some dark cavern of the underworld" (387), whereas Father Brown defends reason against superstition, which he compares to the sea drowning all the "old rationalism and scepticism" in the modern world (394).

4. Gardens of the South and of the North

In *The Paradise of Thieves* the crime plot is set against the Mediterranean landscape. The story gradually shifts from a hotel garden, with little lemon and orange trees, to a mountain garden formed by Nature itself in the Alps: "a lap of land [...] padded with turf and clover," "a grassy and flowery hollow like a sunken meadow; a sort of green velvet pocket in the long, green, trailing garments of the hills" (204), a place so lovely that the protagonists think they "have fallen into heaven" (205) and indeed they soon learn that the place is called "the Paradise of Thieves" (206). The name captures the seemingly paradoxical and mutually exclusive combination of the beauty of nature and the dirt of human manipulation.

Here the entire surrounding landscape is paradise-like, both heavenly and domesticated (through the pastoral convention of the description): the woods on the peaks look like orchards; the white road climbs like a white cat; "however high they went, the desert still blossomed like the rose" and they could admire "the southern parks tilted on the splintered northern peaks; the gorge of Glencoe laden with the fruits of Kent," the wild scenery that "was rather like a mosaic palace,

rent with earthquakes; or like a Dutch tulip garden blown to the stars with dynamite” (203–04). Typically, this delightful natural garden is not only an ornament but also has “some other strange sort of importance,” some connection with the crime plot, to which it provides a clue; as Father Brown puts it, it is “more like an accidental theatre or a natural green-room; it is like the scene for some romantic comedy” (209).

A serene-looking garden can be misleading in its implications, as in *The Paradise of Thieves*, where the natural amphitheatre witnesses an accusation of embezzlement followed by the culprit’s suicidal leap from the mountain wall. In a different way, the same pattern is illustrated in *The Honour of Israel Gow*, whose setting in the mountains of Scotland helps to form horrible suspicions, ultimately dispelled. The events of the strange castle of Glengyle, standing at the end of a grey Scotch valley which “looked like the end of the world” (90), centre in the castle’s dim garden, particularly the kitchen-garden, where a half-witted gardener dressed in black is found perpetually digging potatoes. The story is full of something like Scottish Gothic. As Flambeau puts it, there is something in the landscape, in “these cursed cold mountains,” in “the black, brainless repetition,” in “all these forests,” with “pine trees and more pine trees and millions more pine trees,” and “over all an ancient horror of unconsciousness” that drives people mad (97).

Though Father Brown at first suspects the worst black magic to lie behind the monstrosity that the detectives dig up beside the lines of cabbages, he finally manages to explain rationally the mystery of the Earl’s head buried among the potatoes. The story exemplifies the familiar pattern: although the natural setting evokes superstition and calls up supernatural creatures as agents of crime, in the end reason is always restored. Although the worst possible thing falls on Father Brown and his companion detectives in this story, which is that “We have found the truth; and the truth makes no sense” (99), the crisis of reason only momentarily shakes the priest’s faith and is soon overcome. Interestingly, the help comes through sleep, which Father Brown defines as a natural sacrament, at once “an act of faith” and “a food” (98).

5. Country-House Gardens

A typical garden setting of crime is an old family mansion with adjacent gardens, as illustrated by some of the already discussed and many other stories.⁹ Chesterton often locates his mysteries on the grounds surrounding a country house, inhabited by rich but morally degenerate noblemen, creating an atmosphere characteristic of Elizabethan tragedies, particularly of the revenge type, and of Gothic romances. This is also the case of Pendragon Park, the magnificent estate of Sir Claude Champion in *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*. Its master, out of envy, stabs

himself through the body with a rapier, but before he dies he manages to denounce as his assassin the friend he has been pathologically jealous of. The spectacular death is witnessed by an American journalist, whose approach towards its scene is described in great detail to create a creepy atmosphere: as he walks by night along the long avenue of black pine woods towards the inner gardens of Pendragon Park, the word "Ravenswood" comes to his mind, and he also thinks of ghosts and feels "violence and secrecy" (320).

The crime itself is staged on the sundial: "Above him, at the angle of the steep green bank of the terraced garden, was one of those small picturesque surprises common in the old landscape gardening; a kind of small round hill or dome of grass, like a giant molehill, ringed and crowned with three concentric fences of roses, and having a sundial in the highest point in the centre" (321). The staging of the crime reveals to Father Brown its real nature for, as he argues, the accused Mr Boulnois could not commit it: "He would not snatch Romeo's sword from its romantic scabbard; or slay his foe on the sundial as on a kind of altar; or leave his body among the roses, or fling the sword away among the pines. If Boulnois killed anyone he'd do it quietly and heavily, as he'd do any other doubtful thing" (324). The romantic setting, as Father Brown brilliantly observes, points to Champion himself, who always loved acting and theatricals. The honesty of John Boulnois, on the other hand, is suggested from the outset by the garden of his own house, the Grey Cottage, with a dog-kennel and a beehive, which stood outside "like symbols of old English country-life" (319).

6. Suburban Gardens

A similar though distinct atmosphere is created in the suburbs, those labyrinths of same-looking streets, with houses lost in large gardens behind blank walls. One such suburb and garden provide the setting for crime in *The Mirror of the Magistrate*: it is the garden of Mr Justice Gwynne, which by night "was rather a singular spectacle" (501) because, owing to the owner's strange hobby, it was illuminated by "several coloured lamps, entangled in the trees like the jewel fruits of Aladdin" (502). On this particular occasion the artificial illumination encircles the owner himself, found lying dead with his head in the pond. The murder investigation depends to a large extent on the topography of the place, for example on how and why people entered it getting over garden walls rather than through the gate, and Father Brown clears the main suspect, a poet, by being able to understand the function of a peculiar device: "a curiously clipped hedge with a hole in it, like a green cave, under the shadow of which some broken steps peeped out" (506). The priest follows the steps and finds out that they lead to "what looked like a broken bridge, over-hanging the darker and emptier spaces of the garden" (506). Later on, Father Brown thus explains why the poet could linger there for

two hours at the time when the murder was committed: because he was an artist and “the view of that illuminated garden from that unfinished bridge [...] was as unique as the fourth dimension,” “a sort of fairy foreshortening”; the path which led nowhere had led the poet to “the country at the end of the world” (512). This insight leads the priest to understand that it was not the poet but a fellow member of the legal profession, and the prosecuting counsel in the poet’s trial, who killed the old judge. Paradoxically, the latter’s garden, “that paradise of peace and legality” (501), has become an arena of war within the body of justice.

Another peculiar specimen of a garden and a house, located in the wealthy suburbs of London, provides the setting for the daring murder committed in *The Wrong Shape*. The house is a long, low bungalow, running parallel with the road, painted mostly white and pale green, with a veranda and sun-blinds, and a quaint sort of cupolas over the porches. It looks at once old-fashioned and very English, and at the same time oriental, as if “built by an Anglo-Indian” (102). The house and its gardens, especially the conservatory, are described in great detail so that “the reader may understand this tragic tale” (102):

The whole house was built upon the plan of a T, but a T with a very long cross piece and a very short tail piece. The long cross piece was the frontage that ran along in face of the street, with the front door in the middle; it was two stories high, and contained nearly all the important rooms. The short tail piece, which ran out at the back immediately opposite the front door, was one story high, and consisted only of two long rooms, the one leading into the other. The first of these two rooms was the study in which the celebrated Mr Quinton wrote his wild Oriental poems and romances. The farther room was a glass conservatory full of tropical blossoms of quite unique and almost monstrous beauty, and on such afternoons as these glowing with gorgeous sunlight. Thus when the hall door was open, many a passer-by literally stopped to stare and gasp; for he looked down a perspective of rich apartments to something really like a transformation scene in a fairy play: purple clouds and golden suns and crimson stars that were at once scorchingly vivid and yet transparent and far away. (*The Wrong Shape* 102–103)

This artistic household perfectly expresses the personality of its owner, who, as the narrator comments, “dealt much in eastern heavens, rather worse than most western hells” (103) and whose character was therefore difficult for his close ones to bear. It is the shape of the house that leads Father Brown on to the murderer and helps both the priest and the reader understand the latter’s motives. When Doctor Harris says that “[t]he house is the wrong shape” and Father Brown disagrees, saying that the shape of the house is quaint, even laughable, but “there is nothing wrong about it” (106), the doctor’s deep-seated negative sentiment towards Mr Quinton is revealed, whose unhealthy fascination with the Orient, epitomised by the twisted shapes and exotic colours of his dwelling, gets on his nerves. By drawing attention to the shape of the house and to geometrical forms in general,

the story highlights what is crooked in the first place, that is murder itself. All the events take place in the house and its outdoor gardens and are set against the red light of evening rapidly giving way to darkness, and in this case to thunderstorm.

7. Urban Gardens

The final category of gardens that Chesterton depicts with relish or merely evokes is comprised of all kinds of city gardens. *The Mistake of the Machine*, for example, opens with Father Brown and Flambeau “sitting in the Temple Gardens about sunset” (238). The mystery of *The Invisible Man* is located at a modern housing estate known as Himalaya Mansions, a “pile of flats sitting above London as above a green sea of slate,” but even in this absurdly urbanised area there is “a bushy enclosure more like a steep hedge or dyke than a garden,” with “a strip of artificial water” running below (82). Chesterton emphasises here the artificiality of urban gardens but also the need for contact with nature in the midst of concrete.

In *The Three Tools of Death* the murder investigation takes place against the background of industrialised London, in the garden of Sir Aaron Armstrong’s house, a depressing “modern and prosaic tower” on the rural skirt of Hampstead, whose narrowest side “overhung the steep bank of railway, and was shaken by passing trains” (174). As Father Brown finds out, Sir Aaron was broken against this green bank, breaking his neck by falling out of a window, and the police investigators arrive at the crime scene by train.

The atmosphere of an urban garden is particularly well conveyed in *The Miracle of Moon Crescent*. The place called Moon Crescent is a side street in New York, introduced by the narrator as romantic enough, in the sense of combining the genuine historic sentiment with the commercialism typical of “the elder cities on the eastern coast of America”: “At one extremity or horn of the crescent its last windows looked over an enclosure like a strip of a gentleman’s park, with trees and hedges as formal as a Queen Anne garden. But immediately round the corner, the other windows, even of the same rooms, or rather ‘apartments’, looked out on the blank, unsightly wall of a huge warehouse attached to some ugly industry” (396). The mystery related in the story begins in one such elegant apartment, located on the fourteenth floor of an American hotel, which, “though lower than the colossal warehouse, would have been called a skyscraper in London” (397). The disappearance of a celebrity man, Warren Wynd, from his study overlooking the little garden and the subsequent finding of his body hanging from a tree in that small ornamental park becomes a great mystery and gives rise to much speculation.

Chesterton brilliantly captures the way public parks can give city-dwellers the only contact with nature they can get. When the characters enter the little public garden and see the spectral moon rising behind the black tree-tops, the narrator

remarks that “[n]ight veiled much of what was merely urban and artificial about the place, and as they melted into the shadows of the trees they had a strange feeling of having suddenly travelled many hundred miles from their homes” (405). Nature at once transports people into another world, but also breeds all kinds of superstition in their minds. Father Brown is at first being scorned for various improbable absurdities in which he apparently believes as a Catholic priest, but then those who deride him, and who considered themselves to be above such things as fairy tales, magic or mystical intuitions, are brought to the belief that a great miracle happened before their eyes, whereas Father Brown explains the murder case in a simple and rational way. This is a more complex version of Chesterton’s strategy of using garden settings of crime as a way of encouraging supernatural explanations, only to restore the rule of reason in the end all the more effectively.

As Father Brown explains, while it is “natural to believe in the supernatural,” it “never feels natural to accept only natural things” (414), though this is the gist of sound Catholic doctrine. The latter is further exemplified by Father Brown who, while not denying that he believes in miracles, does not see them happening everywhere: “If I want any miracles, I know where to get them,” he says (412). In addition, by showing how the great man is killed “for being a judge of men” (414) and how it is Father Brown’s own business “to pray for all men” (415), even those so unfathomably inhuman as to provoke their neighbours to murder, the story shows Christianity to be a religion of mercy and hope.

8. *The Blue Cross*

The first four of Father Brown mysteries are likewise set in urban gardens. These stories in many ways establish Chesterton’s semiotics of the green theatre of crime. In *The Blue Cross* the garden is London’s Hampstead Heath, a kind of natural park formed by a valley enclosed within wooded hills, frequented by the city’s holiday-makers. As the reader follows the main characters into this oasis of green through the endless North London suburbs, an opposition is set up between the hellish urban extensions, which “seemed to shoot out into length after length like an infernal telescope” (24), with their dark streets, “bare brick ways like tunnels,” “streets with few lights and even with few windows,” “streets that seemed built out of the blank backs of everything and everywhere” (25), and the Heath, which by virtue of its light and spaciousness is imbued with reverse, heavenly qualities: “when they came out unexpectedly into the void common and vast sky they were startled to find the evening still so light and clear” (26). The Heath re-directs the spatial perspective from the horizontal to the vertical axis, which makes one think of the Maker of the natural kingdom:

A perfect dome of peacock-green sank into gold amid the blackening trees and the dark violet distances. The glowing green tint was just deep enough to pick out in points of crystal one or two stars. All that was left of the daylight lay in a golden glitter across the edge of Hampstead and that popular hollow which is called the Vale of Health. [...] The glory of heaven deepened and darkened around the sublime vulgarity of man [...]. (*The Blue Cross* 26)

The vocabulary and imagery has clear metaphysical connotations, apart from underlining the beauty of the natural artifice. Thus, a higher order of meaning is superimposed on the typical preoccupations of detective fiction as the green space is imaginatively transformed into a natural cathedral, an effect enhanced as the evening progresses: “The gorgeous green and gold still clung to the darkening horizon; but the dome above was turning slowly from peacock-green to peacock-blue, and the stars detached themselves more and more like solid jewels” (28). As the action moves gradually away from the urban crowds “to the wilder and more silent heights of the Heath” (27), the visual details of the spatial setting are organised by an opposition between the profane and the sacred and signal the spiritual struggle of good and evil.

It is against this background that Flambeau and Father Brown, the famous criminal and his relentless pursuer, overheard by the head of the Paris police, talk about the meaning of the vast universe. The object of the jewel thief’s desire has been “a silver cross with sapphires, a relic of considerable value” (27), the title blue cross, carried by Father Brown, “the guarder of the relic” (29), reminiscent of the Keeper of the Holy Grail in medieval romance. The story is thus infused with crucial Christian symbolism. Tellingly, the colour scheme of the silver cross – blue, incusted with sapphires – parallels the colours of the natural garden, peacock-green turning to peacock-blue, with the stars resembling solid jewels, suggesting the Creator’s responsibility for the magnificent work of creation, which bears a cruciform imprint. This is signalled from the start by the colours of the natural setting, “[b]etween the silver ribbon of morning and the green glittering ribbon of sea” (17). A certain artificiality of this image points to the Artificer of air, sea, and land.

The Heath transforming into a cosmic garden provides the transcendent perspective upon the doings of men, from which the three principal characters appear as mere insects: to Valentin, looking at Father Brown and Flambeau from a distance, the two seem “as small as insects” (26), “crawling like black flies across the huge green contour of a hill” (27), while Valentin himself is analogously viewed by the narrator – as quite inconspicuous among “a swarm of folk” that disperse from a continental boat “like flies” (17). Thus, even the greatest of humans, namely, the most famous investigator of the world, Valentin, and the “colossus of crime” and man “of gigantic stature and bodily daring,” as Flambeau is repeatedly described, and even the little Roman Catholic priest, Father Brown, the

apparent “celibate simpleton,” to whom nonetheless both of the former are finally obliged to bow as their “master” (32), are reduced and symbolically ‘blackened’ from this perspective, which on the one hand implies their equal potential for corruption at the hands of the Lord of the Flies, and consequent need of humility, and on the other subjects them, as part of nature, to a universal hierarchy and order.

The garden-like setting of Hampstead Heath, described as “the brow of a great dome of hill overlooking an amphitheatre of rich and desolate sunset scenery” (28), is put forward as a spatial model of the universe, conceived as rational, moral, and accountable to supreme divine authority. The natural realm is like paradise, *rich* and *desolate*, gorgeously beautiful yet susceptible to evil. It is also envisaged as stage, implying an external, objective viewpoint. A wider perspective is introduced into the story in many ways, one of them being the hints of later events lying beyond the temporal scope of this particular narrative. Thus, Flambeau’s reformation is foreshadowed when the narrator explains: “It is many years now since this colossus of crime suddenly ceased keeping the world in a turmoil; and when he ceased, as they said after the death of Roland, there was a great quiet upon the earth” (17). Less explicitly, Valentin’s fall to crime is anticipated when his “curt black beard” is described as Spanish-looking and suggesting “an Elizabethan ruff” (17). Thus, a strange reversal of roles is implied from the outset, with the thief being compared to a hero like Roland while the representative of justice – to a ruffian of Elizabethan revenge tragedies. Chesterton thus alerts us to the moral perspective central to his mode of detective-story writing, allowing for conversion as well as degeneration.

Furthermore, the background event of the story, the Eucharistic Congress taking place in London, epitomises a specifically religious and Catholic worldview – sacramental, based upon the Incarnation, including the veneration of the Cross and other relics, as well as the belief in “miracles” (19). Out of tune with London’s modern spiritual climate, the Congress recalls England’s glorious Catholic past. The little Essex priest Father Brown epitomises the great role of Northern Christianity in ecclesiastical history: condescendingly described by Valentin in many derogatory terms and equally underestimated by Flambeau, he emerges as the true hero.

An important component of the story is the inherent theological and philosophical debate, centring on reason and carried on between the three principal characters. Valentin’s views, those of “a sceptic in the severe style of France,” are effectively challenged. While he pities the clergyman as one of those “creatures” whom the Eucharistic Congress “sucked out of their local stagnation [...], blind and helpless, like moles disinterred” (18), he allows himself, ironically, to be blinded by the inconspicuous priest, whom he perceives with a Southerner’s superiority as “so much the essence of those Eastern flats,” a man with “a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling” and with “eyes as empty as the North Sea” (18). Although the narrator praises Valentin’s intellect and “all his wonderful suc-

cesses," which "had been gained by plodding logic" (20), he does so with a note of sarcasm. Thus, "the French intelligence" is said to be "intelligence specially and solely" (19), that is, so radically simplistic as to lead to disastrous consequences: "[t]he French electrify the world [...] by carrying out a truism [...] so far – as in the French Revolution" (20).

Valentin's method of reckoning on the unforeseen is apparently similar to the narrator's own belief in miracles: "The most incredible thing about miracles is that they happen. A few clouds in heaven do come together in the staring shape of one human eye. A tree does stand up in the landscape of a doubtful journey in the exact and elaborate shape of a note of interrogation. I have seen both these things myself within the last few days" (19). Like the authorial narrative persona, Valentin seems to recognise in life "an element of elfin coincidence" (19) and acknowledges that reasoning is impossible "without strong, undisputed first principles" (20), but limits this view to particular mundane cases, whereas the narrator holds it on a universal, metaphysical scale, intuiting the divine personal presence behind natural occurrences. Thus, in his pursuit of Flambeau, Valentin looks for the traces unwittingly left by the thief, but misses the fact of being led himself by the real priest. The latter has staged a number of 'miracles' which, apart from the pragmatic function of testing Flambeau and guiding Valentin to the Heath, also showcase their perpetrator's Christian faith: the replacing of sugar with salt is reminiscent of transubstantiation; the upsetting of a tradesman's apples reminds one of Christ's behaviour in the temple; and the paying in advance for a broken window reveals the seeming criminal to be an honest man. Acting like a holy idiot, Father Brown arranges even his crimes as possible ways of Christian testimony. Valentin, on the other hand, misses the way the 'miracles' point to the real rather than the disguised priest.

Throughout Father Brown's conversation with Flambeau the word *reason* is recurrent (28). Father Brown adapts his talk to the perspective of his interlocutor, the jewel thief, and speaks of fantastic worlds made of jewels. Flambeau's awesome admiration for the "millions" of "wonderful universes above us" (28) shows him to be something of a mystic, but he cannot bring himself to the belief that the cosmos is reasonable. This is later called by Father Brown "bad theology" (32). For his part, the priest firmly defends reason, whereby he proves to be a sound Thomist.¹⁰ God is for him the incorruptible Source of justice and moral commandments, but he also maintains that "[a]lone on earth, the Church affirms that God himself is bound by reason" (28). All this is lost on cynical Valentin, who limits his intelligence to what happens in this world. In fact, Father Brown addresses his argument partly to him as well, knowing him to be lurking in the bushes, but to Valentin, concerned solely with arresting the criminal, the priestly talk is merely "metaphysical gossip" (29). The way Father Brown's argument is complemented by the narrator's own observations makes it more than a character's opinion, turning it into Chesterton's own tacit apology of Christianity.¹¹ The images of the

Heath, an emblem of the reality created in accordance with the rules of reason, serve as an embodiment of this worldview.

Father Brown's task in the story is to save the cross, which may sound paradoxical, for Christians believe that the cross is the sole instrument of their salvation: "I saved the cross," says Father Brown and adds immediately, "as the cross will always be saved" (31). On the one hand, through his intelligence and dexterity the priest "made sure that the cross should go *safe*" (30; my emphasis), but on the other, he has acted in the confidence of himself being made *safe* by the cross. Valentin comments ironically on how the priest "explained with a mooncalf simplicity to everybody in the carriage that he had to be careful, because he had something made of real silver 'with blue stones' in one of his brown-paper parcels" (19), but attracting criminals is apparently Father Brown's deliberate strategy. He manages to attract Flambeau and mentions other past encounters with thieves and felons. His task is to make them *safe* by telling them about God and hearing their confessions. The priest's conversation with Flambeau in a secluded part of Hampstead Heath resembles exactly confession: the thief keeps his head bowed all the time. Father Brown, the guardian of the holy object, like the Fisher King, is really a fisher of men, as he will call himself in another story.

9. *The Secret Garden*

The events of *The Secret Garden* take place at Valentin's home, which is an old Parisian house, with a very odd garden almost overhanging the Seine, for although there were many exits from the house into the garden, there was "no exit from the garden into the world outside," and the garden was surrounded, like a fortress, by "a tall, smooth, unscalable wall with special spikes at the top" (33). Against the supposition that the "large and elaborate" garden would give the Chief of the Paris Police opportunity for quiet rumination over the most difficult cases of crime, he uses it as a place to commit a perfect murder, so the garden becomes the site of his own fall. The dark back parts of the mansion are charged with sinister and evil connotations from the start: the confidential servant Ivan, a man with a scar, looks like an assassin; the entrance hall is hung with weapons; words like "Mephistophelean" (35), "satanic" (40), and "the devil" (42) reappear; and there is a triple knocking on the door, compared to that in *Macbeth* (39), whereby the house and its back-yard are made to evoke hell.

Before the murder is reported in a matter-of-fact style, "a dead man has been found in the garden, his head cut clean from his body" (39), its discovery is described in ways that evoke Eden as the site of the original sin: one of Valentin's guests *trips* over "[a] corpse in the grass"; the body is found "sunken deep in the grass," with "[a] scarlet serpent of blood" *crawling* from under the victim's "fallen face"; it is revealed that "[t]he head fell away"; and the mist rises from the

river as if to mark symbolically the mystery of the horrible beheading (36–39). Thus, the mystery in the sense attributed to it in crime fiction is bound up with the metaphysical mystery of the origin of evil and the divine mysteries of creation and salvation, as contemplated in medieval genres like the mystery play rather than in detective stories.

The symbolism of the garden setting is Chesterton's principal instrument of expanding and deepening the meaning of the story. The moonlit garden becomes a kind of theatrical stage, with the moon operating like the footlights, pointing to the supernatural witness of the crime: "[t]he argent light lit up all four corners of the garden" so that "[t]he blue-and-silver garden" became "like a scene in a theatre," and "[t]he next instant the moon and the tall poplars looked at an unusual sight" (36). Interestingly, the colours of the moonlit garden are exactly those of the "blue cross" of the first story, marking the specifically Christian supernatural presence, and one is reminded that Valentin has been determined "to break what he calls the superstition of the Cross" (48).

As the murder mystery is unravelled, the spiritual battle becomes specific: the victim turns out to be an American multi-millionaire, who had believed in all religions and made colossal endowments to some of them, but after a recent talk to Father Brown was thinking of joining his church, and perhaps leaving to it all his money. It is this news that prompts Valentin, a great "anti-clerical" (43), to get rid of the Yankee. In his anti-Catholic zeal, the Chief of the Paris Police devises to pervert rather than guard justice. He invents an ingenious murder plot, involving double heads, to be carried out in his own garden. The story juxtaposes "the good priest and the good atheist" (38), but shows the latter not to be so good at all. Criticism is aimed at the French culture as a whole, epitomised by the guillotine and by "the great devil" who "above a mountain and forest of gargoyles [...] grins on Notre Dame" (43), and finally by Valentin himself as "one of the great humanitarian French freethinkers" who "make mercy even colder than justice" (33).

Whereas Valentin's militant atheism and superficial rationalism lead him to homicide, and pride leads him to suicide once his deed is discovered, Father Brown professes confession with the possibility of repentance for every sinner and leaves judgement to God, bowing before the impenetrable mysteries of His justice and mercy. The garden imagery evokes this divine dimension when before committing the murder Valentin is caught at a moment of reflection, looking for a few seconds through the open garden door of his study "out upon the garden" with "a wistfulness unusual in such scientific natures as his" (33). The nocturnal sky, showing a "sharp" moon "fighting with the flying rags and tatters of a storm" (33), is a symbol Valentin tries yet fails fully to comprehend. So he proceeds with his murderous intrigue, while the moon wins the battle in the sky and its scimitar comes to illumine the crime.

Chesterton uses the motif of the garden to distinguish between rational and irrational attitudes. All the stereotypes of the Roman Catholic superstition and the “Frenchified intellect” (48) collapse as the little priest turns out to be the only sensible individual at the crime scene while almost everyone else gives in to most fantastic imaginings. Thus, a jealous father envisages the moonlit garden as a charming spot of secret love: “He was trapped as if by magic into a garden of troubadours, a Watteau fairyland” (36). The reactions upon finding the blood-stained corpse in the grass are for the most part highly emotional and shaped by reading and hearing of similar stories: “those satanic tragedies that have been between lovers before now,” stories behind “old portraits in a dark house,” and “formless historical memories of murdered husbands and poisonous paramours” (40). Besides the script of love tragedy, fairy-tale fantasies are readily activated as well so that, for example, Father Brown examining the garden wall appears to be “like a goblin” (37). An Irishman is shown to be especially affected, until he realises with horror that “[h]eads don’t grow on garden bushes” (48): “The borderland of the brain, where all the monsters are made moved horribly in [him]” so that he felt “the chaotic presence of all the horse-men and fish-women that man’s unnatural fancy has begotten” and a voice “older than his first fathers” seemed telling him to keep out of “the monstrous garden where grows the tree with double fruit” and to avoid “the evil garden where died the man with two heads” (47). In contrast, the priest succeeds in unravelling the mystery of the two heads with the rigour of an “Aquinas” (45) and the help of prayer and intuition.

10. *The Queer Feet*

Valentin’s garden is the spatial embodiment of its owner’s mental outlook, based solely on negation (anti-clericalism, atheism, eradication of crime), without embracing any positive values, but the ultimate cause of the French policeman’s lapse remains secret, like the “secret garden” of his house. The next story, *The Queer Feet*, likewise features an old and secret garden, but one which is situated in London and which plays a part in preventing the crime and reforming the criminal. The story is set at an extremely exclusive hotel of the kind that, in order to protect a particular class of individuals, is designed to turn people away rather than attract them, being located most inconveniently, “in the corner of a square in Belgravia” (49), and so small that only twenty-four guests can dine in it at once: “The only big dinner table was the celebrated terrace table, which stood open to the air on a sort of veranda overlooking one of the most exquisite old gardens in London” (50). The name of the select club whose annual dinner is described in the story, “The Twelve True Fishermen” (49), brings to mind the twelve apostles. The way they are seated at the table, along its inner side, “with no one opposite, command-

ing an uninterrupted view of the garden" (56), is reminiscent of pictorial representations of the Last Supper. However, the superficial similarity serves Chesterton to satirise the "Fishermen," while suggesting that true followers of Christ are quite different:

Father Brown got to his feet, putting his hands behind him. "Odd, isn't it," he said, "that a thief and a vagabond should repent, when so many who are rich and secure remain hard and frivolous, and without fruit for God or man? [...] If you doubt the penitence as a practical fact, there are your knives and forks. You are The Twelve True Fishers, and there are all your silver fish. But He has made me a fisher of men." "Did you catch this man?" asked the colonel, frowning.

Father Brown looked him full in his frowning face. "Yes," he said, "I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread." (*The Queer Feet* 60)

The imagery of living fruit and fish contrasts with the club's artificial rituals and ceremonies, with their "celebrated set of fish knives and forks which were, as it were, the insignia of the society, each being exquisitely wrought in silver in the form of a fish, and each loaded at the hilt with one large pearl" (50).

The garden provides a symbolic setting for Flambeau's reformation, which takes place, exactly like Valentin's momentary contemplation of the garden, on a stormy evening just before sunset. The last stormy evening light glimpsed by the thief in the window is framed like a landscape picture, pointing to the hand of a supreme Artist. Like Father Brown, Flambeau is sensitive to the beauty of nature, and can read the natural contrasts of light and darkness as a sign of God, unlike the Twelve Fishermen, who remain indifferent to the full view of the garden in front of them, "the colours of which were still vivid" (56). A mere look at the window, "now a square pane full of purple cloud cleft by livid sunset," makes Father Brown instinctively smell evil (53). A similar look inspires Flambeau to change his mind and to confess and return the stolen silver: "he looked very carefully at the window, beyond Father Brown's head, still coloured with the afterglow of a storm" (55). Flambeau is able to read nature spiritually and to associate the display of light in the stormy evening sky with "the fire that is not quenched," with which Father Brown threatens him (55). The thief can do it because he is a true artist. A crime, as Father Brown claims, "is like any other work of art" (63), but Flambeau's powerful, sensitive nature, suggested by his meaningful name, coming from the French word for *flame*, reveals a deep kind of artist, who ultimately cannot help being drawn to the eternal Light.

11. *The Flying Stars*

Chesterton indicates this defining trait of Flambeau's character from the outset, when in *The Blue Cross* the thief confesses his awe for the magnificence of the stars – “The mystery of the heaven is unfathomable, and I for one can only bow my head,” he says (29) – but his reformation is not complete till his last crime, which is also his most beautiful one, as described in *The Flying Stars*. The story commences with a projection of Flambeau's “highly moral old age,” a vantage point from which he reminisces over his past misdeeds, claiming that as an artist he “had always attempted to provide crimes suitable to the special season or landscapes in which [he] found himself, choosing this or that terrace or garden for a catastrophe, as if for a statuary group” and framing one type of victim “in the green lawns and grey towers of some cathedral town” and another “against a grey line of clipped poplars” on the solemn plains of Gaul (65). The garden settings of crime are thus said to be shaped by the criminal himself, and have been shaped so by Chesterton, but an objective significance of the natural setting proceeds from the Ultimate Author of all things, as made particularly clear in this story.

By its account, Flambeau's last crime occurred at Christmas and was in line with the character of the season as “a cheery, cosy, English middle-class crime; a crime of Charles Dickens” (65). Accordingly, the events are situated “in a good old middle-class house near Putney” (65) and the gardens of the house play a particularly meaningful role: there is a typical English garden in front, complete with a monkey tree, and “an alley or cloister of laurels” leads to the larger garden behind, “a glimmering plantation of evergreens” (66). The plot is incited when a girl comes out into the garden to feed the birds with bread on Boxing Day and exclaims to see a boy jump down from the high garden wall protecting the premises from the outside world. The girl and the boy turn out to be the daughter of the house and her boyfriend, while the garden wall symbolises the social divisions and inequalities between the rich and the poor and thus initiates a thread of socio-political and ethical argument that runs through the story, and unobtrusively through the Father Brown stories as a whole, also as a factor conducive to crime. The arrival of the girl's extremely wealthy godfather is crucial for the crime plot for it is his Christmas gift to her, consisting of three great African diamonds, called “The Flying Stars” on account that they have been stolen so often (68), that becomes the object of Flambeau's desire.

As in the preceding stories, the crime scene is illumined by the light of an evening sky: “The winter afternoon was reddening towards evening, and already a ruby light was rolled over the bloomless beds, filling them as it were, with the ghosts of the dead roses” (65). Whenever the double front doors of the house are opened in the course of the night, which happens quite often, the noctur-

nal winter garden is summoned as a kind of supernatural witness to the events, and like another stage in the theatre: "The priest opened them and they showed again the front garden of evergreens, monkey tree and all, now gathering gloom against a gorgeous violet sunset. The scene thus framed was so coloured and quaint, like a back scene in a play, that they forgot a moment the insignificant figure standing at the door" (68). Through the artistic shaping, the magnificent natural background is imbued with an underlying significance, inscribed into it by the divine Maker, the greatest artist of all. When the party gathered in the house decide to entertain themselves by having "a proper old English pantomime – clown, columbine, and so on" (69), played against the front doors, the garden literally becomes the back scene in the play whenever the doors are open.

Indeed, the gist of the performance occurs precisely at one such moment: "The climax [...] was the moment when the two front doors at the back of the scene flew open, showing the lovely moonlit garden [...] the harlequin danced slowly backwards out of the door into the garden, which was full of moonlight and stillness," and his "vamped dress of silver paper and paste [...] looked more and more magical and silvery" (71–72). The action thus moves out again into the garden, embodying an eternal perspective:

There were hollows and bowers at the extreme end of that leafy garden, in which the laurels and other immortal shrubs showed against sapphire sky and silver moon, even in that midwinter, warm colours as of the south. The green gaiety of the waving laurels, the rich purple indigo of the night, the moon like a monstrous crystal, make an almost irresponsible romantic picture; and among the top branches of the garden trees a strange figure is climbing, who looks not so much romantic as impossible. He sparkles from head to heel, as if clad in ten million moons; the real moon catches him at every movement and sets a new inch of him on fire. But he swings, flashing and successful, from the short tree in this garden to the tall, rambling tree in the other, and only stops there because a shade has slid under the smaller tree and has unmistakably called up to him.

"Well, Flambeau," says the voice, "you really look like a Flying Star, but that always means a Falling Star at last." (*The Flying Stars* 74)

The priest thus confronting the arch-criminal acknowledges his genius, the divine sparkle within him, but at the same time warns him of the inevitably wretched end of a life of crime, even if motivated by the noblest ideals, like bringing justice to the world, and ultimately succeeds in the restoration of the stolen gems. A deeper effect is achieved by juxtaposing manmade jewels and contrivances against the immortality and splendour of nature, pointing to the greatness of the Creator. Flambeau is a great artist, but unless he submits himself to that greatest Artist of all, argues Father Brown, he can only be a Falling Star. The garden imagery helps Father Brown to get this message over to Flambeau.

Paradoxically, it is only when the latter relinquishes the jewels that he becomes a true jewel himself and achieves real freedom: “Three flashing diamonds fell from the tree to the turf. The small man stooped to pick them up, and when he looked up again the green cage of the tree was emptied of its silver bird” (75).

Conclusion

Chesterton employs a variety of picturesque gardens as the setting of crime in his detective stories. The manmade trappings of the gardens recall the history of gardening and the principal literary and cultural conventions, epitomising Englishness itself; Chesterton uses them also for social and political commentary. The natural in the garden, on the other hand, is shown to be the source of the supernatural, but the stories are so designed as to dispel superstition and fantasy, and treat nature as the manifestation of reason and divine order, as well as a reliquary of natural sacraments. Interestingly, Chesterton’s garden mysteries invariably begin on sunny afternoons which turn into evening and sometimes to stormy or moonlit night. The play of natural light and darkness opens the metaphysical and moral subtexts of the stories. Nature is the site of human falls, but can also inspire the reformation of those who can read its spiritual signs.

Notes

- 1 G. K. Chesterton wrote five volumes of stories about Father Brown, subsequently published as a single book. The first volume, *The Innocence of Father Brown*, was published in 1911 and was followed by *The Wisdom of Father Brown* in 1914. Each contained twelve stories. Two further volumes appeared after a longer break: *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (1926) and *The Secret of Father Brown* (1927). The final volume was *The Scandal of Father Brown* (1935). Altogether Chesterton wrote 52 Father Brown stories. This paper discusses stories from all five volumes. All quotations follow *The Complete Father Brown Stories* (Wordsworth Editions, 2006).
- 2 Chesterton apparently did not consciously allude, though, to Burnett’s text, or vice versa. Still, his stories would provide plenty of material for a study of intertextuality, a subject particularly dear to Professor Andrzej Weseliński, who has studied it both in literature and film adaptations.
- 3 For general information about the history of gardens and the *topos* of the garden in European literature and culture see Rymkiewicz (1968, 2010), Drabble (1979), Hobhouse (2002), and Sosnowski and Wójcik (2008). Valuable studies of gardens in children’s literature have been published by Jadwiga Węgrodzka. See e.g. her “Gardens in Moral Tales,” which contains also some

- good observations on the cultural and genre aspects of the garden.
- 4 The garden could be treated as an integral part of the house, but in the context of Chesterton's stories it is more convenient to think of it on its own terms, for apart from domestic back and front yards the stories feature also hotel and restaurant gardens, public parks, and natural enclosures.
 - 5 For example, David Stuart Davies states that Chesterton "regarded this form of entertaining fiction as a relatively pleasant way for him to support himself and his wife while he went on with what he regarded as his important work – his political and religious writings" (10). The artistic achievement of the Father Brown stories against the dominant conventions of detective-story writing has been convincingly demonstrated by Joanna Kokot in her two papers, to which I am much indebted.
 - 6 Peter Ackroyd in *Albion* devotes a separate chapter, "Green England," to the love of gardening as a distinctly English trait.
 - 7 The Gothic in English literature and film has been Professor Andrzej Weseliński's favourite field of research. Cf. e. g. his paper, "Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: the Victorian Gothic and its Postmodern Legacy" (*From Queen Anne to Queen Victoria*, ed. G. Bystydzieńska and E. Harris, Warszawa 2009, 433–441).
 - 8 According to Peter Ackroyd, the taste for blood, gore, and ghosts defines the English (cf. the chapter on "Melodrama" in *Albion*).
 - 9 Cf. also *The Dagger with Wings*, *The Doom of the Darnways*, *The Man with Two Beards*, *The Chief Mourner of Marne*, *The Green Man*, *The Point of a Pin*, and *The Vampire in the Village*.
 - 10 Father Brown has been so applauded by the French philosopher Etienne Gilson, a renowned specialist in Thomism (Gardner 40).
 - 11 Gilson highly praised Chesterton's book on St Thomas Aquinas (Oddie 380).

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