G.K. Chesterton’s *Manalive*: narrative, grace and humanity

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The article proposes the thesis that *Manalive* metaphorically represents the apocalypse because Innocent Smith can be read as a symbol of the desire to meet the Risen One inscribed in the heart of every man. The two parts of the novel are therefore analyzed, first of all highlighting the eschatological traits that characterize the arrival of the protagonist, carried by the wind, and the effect that this produces on the present, and then describing the progress of Innocent as a victory over the fundamental temptations of man, in parallel to what happened to Christ in the desert. The method combines literary analysis and theological reading, according to an epistemology of paradox that seems consistent with the *intentio auctoris* of Chesterton himself.

1. Introduction: a theological hypothesis

“We all want to be found” (Chesterton 1912, 253)\(^1\) says Innocent Smith, the protagonist of G.K. Chesterton’s *Manalive*, words that admirably summarise the relationship between narrative, grace and humanity to which the subtitle refers. In extreme synthesis we can say that the story of a living person has the miraculous capacity to make the human being perceive the grace that grounds his humanity.\(^2\)

The living person in this context is Innocent Smith, the main character of the novel published in 1912, but sketched earlier, as Chesterton himself tells in his autobiography. Here he describes his spiritual state when he conceived the figure of the man who shoots the pessimist to make him discover the immense value of the life he has received as a gift:

> No man knows how much he is an optimist, even when he calls himself a pessimist, because he has not really measured the depths of his debt to whatever created him and enabled him to call himself anything. At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy.\(^3\)

(Chesterton 1937, 94–95)
From this point of view, the author’s intention could be read as strictly theological. He proposes to force open his reader’s thought by means of paradox in order to free him from the limitations of a dead logic and truly live in the happiness of the gift of his or her own identity. The purpose of the narrative is to present amazement as a form of authentic self-knowledge.

But why is such liberation necessary? Why does thought turn in on itself? Chesterton’s strength is precisely the theological clarity of his intent, combined with his great artistic ability. He is not a conservative who merely criticizes his time, but a man in love with truth as a relationship with the real, a man who transmits this very love to his fellow human beings through beauty. The problem is not, therefore, simply modernity rather than heresy, but the fundamental imbalance in man’s heart between his infinite desire and the perception of the limit of his own existence. Each one bears within the soul a thirst that cannot be quenched by anything finite. Thus, living is necessarily accompanied by disillusionment, which often turns into closure of the heart, into a reductionist and intellectualist defence, into dependence on the exterior, into formalism. All these false certainties that the human being uses to try to appease the desperate perception of the hiatus between his own limitation and the tension of the heart are configured as idols that Chesterton fights narratively.

This is the great mystery of the freedom of the heart, theologically rooted in man’s creation in the image and likeness of the one and triune God. The human being has, in fact, his true identity not in himself, but in Christ, from Whom, for Whom and through Whom the creation of all things originated. Thus the need to reopen thought to the possibility of the truth of good, of one’s own good, ultimately has a Christological reason (Nichols 2009; Boyd 1985). And this will be the interpretative line of the present contribution: Innocent Smith, the “innocent blacksmith,” resembles the carpenter of Nazareth, who was put to trial precisely because he identified himself with that Absolute Life, which man desires but cannot understand. We do not want to affirm that Chesterton presents a Christian allegory, constructing his character instrumentally with respect to the Gospel. Innocent Smith resembles Christ but is not the Christ. The proposed thesis is that he is a symbol of Christ as a narrative translation of the desire of the Risen One in the heart of every man.

2. The beautiful apocalypse

The beginning of the novel Manalive is described in terms which can be read as apocalyptic. The wind, which Innocent Smith seems to ride, purifies and pervades everything, especially souls. It is “a strange sunrise at the wrong end of the day” (5) in a kind of “apocalypse” (6), sent to earth “to test men and women” (9).

In such an atmosphere is manifested the living man with two legs, dressed in green and not at all similar to a cherub, characterized rather by an aspect which justifies the suspicion that he was a perfect idiot, starting from the disproportion between the enormous body and the small head (16). He affirms that every man is king, and, crowning Dr. Warner with his hat, he says that one must always wear one’s uniform, even if it is torn (22). But his identity remains mysterious, because the big business card, extracted
from a scarlet box, with his real name, his titles and his real purpose on earth, is ripped away by the western wind, which fades away immediately after (25).

Innocent is known and unknown at the same time, known as Inglewood's old companion, but unrecognisable in his innocence, though without being disembodied or angelic. Rather, he is characterized by "the sensualities of innocence" (34):

He had somehow made a giant stride from babyhood to manhood, and missed that crisis in youth when most of us grow old. (35)

When Inglewood and Michael Moon, immediately after his arrival, follow him on the roof, in the "the secrecy of dusk" (40), they discover that the wine has another taste, even if it is not of excellent quality. The existential experience is so intense that it leads them to wonder if there was any method in the madness of Innocent (43), who manages to introduce them into a fairy world, without leaving their daily life and Beacon House. But it is not an escape from reality, as Inglewood well understands when he sees a gun, among the belongings that Innocent pulls out of his luggage, spreading it on the ground as children do with toys. To his friend's worried question, the protagonist answers enigmatically that with that tool he does not distribute death but life (47), that authentic and human life that seems to be the key to his identity.

From it emanates a real authority, manifested as real authoritativeness, which begins to transform everything around him. So, immediately after his mysterious appearance, at Beacon House spreads "a crazy sense that it was everybody's birthday" (48) and produces an atmosphere that leads everyone to start dancing (81).

The description of such an intoxication seems extremely significant, as it does not take the form of a simple rupture of conventions or a Dionysian frenzy that allows the forces of the unconscious to find their outlet. Rather in the presence of Innocent, passions as well as hobbies become institutions and loves are recognized to turn into marriages:

The truth is that when people are in exceptionally high spirits, really wild with freedom and invention, they always must, and they always do, create institutions. When men are weary they fall into anarchy; but while they are gay and vigorous they invariably make rules. (48)

Freedom is thus given, not in dialectics, but as a relationship, since it is the very presence of Innocent that awakens love and, with it, a new look at the world (64). One is truly free because there is someone, someone who bridges in himself the gap between limit and desire. The movement of the heart and mind is reversed: one does not follow the images, the conventions, the expectations of others, in a vain attempt to escape limits that clash with the boundless momentum that presses from within the chest of man, rather, one immerses oneself in the real full of confidence that is precisely in the limit, in daily life, in concrete reality, where one will meet what one seeks. We pass from idea to presence.

Thanks to the latter, Beacon House can be described as a secret refuge, a garden surrounded by walls placed on top of a tower of the sky (80). The very name of the guest house becomes intelligible here, with its reference to the light of the lighthouse. It should be noted that Chesterton lived and died in a town called Beaconsfield. This
illumination is therefore given in one’s own place, in one’s own origin, in one’s own home. The beyond is inside. Change is in the disposition, in the look:

Leave off buying and selling, and start looking! Open your eyes; and you’ll wake up in the New Jerusalem.

All is gold that glitters:
Tree and tower of brass
Rolls the golden evening air
Down the golden grass;
Kick the cry to Jericho,
How yellow mud is sold;
All is gold that glitters,
For the glitter is the gold. (63)

Everything shines with glory because the gap between infinite desire and limit can be recognized as a promise and, therefore, as a way of salvation. It is therefore a matter of opening our eyes, because “That’s the matter with all of us. We’re too busy to wake up” (68).

But who, then, is Innocent Smith? At first he could seem crazy, but only because everyone wanted love and did not have the courage to admit it (84). He, then, reveals the human heart, showing that “health really is catching, like disease.” (84)

Mrs. Duke states that Innocent is a true gentleman, but she means only that he is understanding, something quite different, as Chesterton with sharp irony notes (53). Rosamund offers an evocative key of interpretation starting from the effects of his presence, which does more good to the inhabitants of the pension than going to church (97). She proposes:

I believe it’s a case of a sort of saint. I believe Innocent Smith is simply innocent, and that is why he is so extraordinary. (87)

But his extraordinary being is not something that separates him from others; on the contrary, he reveals each one’s truest identity. In a certain sense his innocence, which etymologically indicates precisely his inability to nocere, i.e. to harm, and, for this reason, is very different from naivety, shows the heart of man himself, his most secret nucleus. As Inglewood says:

Whether he is my old schoolfellow or no, at least he is all my old schoolfellows. He is the endless bun-eating, ball-throwing animal that we have all been. (88)

Thus the apocalyptic dimension of this figure of Don Juan dressed as Don Quixote (97) emerges with all its strength, as the very vocabulary used by the author clearly indicates:

I believe the maniac was one of those who do not merely come, but are sent; sent like a great gale upon ships by Him who made His angels winds and His messengers a flaming fire. (231)

So, at the end of the novel, when the wind comes back, “While the tempest tore the sky as with trumpets” (310), Innocent, who does not know where he came from, except from that mysterious country that is the memory of childhood, disappears together with his Mary, who seemed to have dressed with the garden and the sky, significantly called “Lady of the garden” (305).
3. The happy process

From a historical point of view, it should be noted that the first idea of the novel was conceived in 1900, right at the turn of the new century. In this context, Innocent Smith is crazy in the eyes of both common sense and scientific theory. And this impossibility to understand it is based on the abstractness of their approach. It is at this level where the real duel takes place, the most authentic clash that makes the protagonist a true revolutionary, though deeply strange. He states, in fact, that “When you’re really shipwrecked, you do really find what you want.” (58) and, on the model of the Three Wise Men who found home in Bethlehem following the star (264), he understands the revolution as a return (245). He dares to break the chains of custom, of false security, of social conventions, of doxa, to paradoxically hunt for the moon. And this not to go beyond the world, but to find in it the true home. Again, the beyond is inside. And it is precisely here that his happiness has its roots, which thus coincides with innocence (300). This is his strength, presented by Chesterton as authentically spiritual:

This man’s spiritual power has been precisely this: that he has distinguished between custom and creed. He has broken the conventions, but he has kept the commandments. (301)

But such fidelity to the commandments rather than to the conventions is theologically presented as unassailable by idols. This is where a Christological reading reveals its strength. In fact, at the heart of this beautiful apocalypse there is a process, to which Innocent assists as a child who plays (138), without worrying, as a god of the garden, so much so that even a little bird rests on him (124).

Four accusations are brought against him by science, represented by the German doctor, and by technology, recalled by the American scholar: murder, theft, abandonment of the marital roof and bigamy. In short, it is about life, property, home and family, that is, the three fundamental dimensions of human life, in which every human being places his or her security. In the desert, however, Christ resisted the temptations with which the devil tested his conscience to be the Son of God (see Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13 and Luke 4:1–13): the proposal to transform stones into bread to give himself life, rather than receiving life itself from the Father, the invitation to worship the devil to have power over the whole earth and, finally, the most subtle challenge to throw himself from the highest pinnacle of the temple to test the Father’s love for him.

In the light of this evangelical datum, one can reread the words of the defensive harangue of Michael Moon, a significant name in an apocalyptic key, with which he shows the true intention of the actions of Innocent:

His principle can then be read biblically as a denial of idols, that is, of those ideas by which we try to appease the desire for infinity in our hearts, leading it back to the narrow prison of customs, of extrinsic rules, of universal solutions identical for all. In the desert, however, Christ resisted the temptations with which the devil tested his conscience to be the Son of God (see Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13 and Luke 4:1–13): the proposal to transform stones into bread to give himself life, rather than receiving life itself from the Father, the invitation to worship the devil to have power over the whole earth and, finally, the most subtle challenge to throw himself from the highest pinnacle of the temple to test the Father’s love for him.
for this reason he arranges ladders and collapsible chimneys to steal his own property; for this reason he goes plodding round a whole planet to get back to his own home. And for this reason he has been in the habit of taking the woman whom he loved with a permanent loyalty, and leaving her about (so to speak) at schools, boarding-houses, and places of business, so that he might recover her again and again with a raid and a romantic elopement. (298–9)

Just as Jesus remains in His reality as Son of God, without yielding to the idol of the idea of nourishment, so Innocent lives against any pessimistic theory and abstract elo-cubration, always putting himself to the test on reality. Just as Christ rejects power, so Innocent always steals again what is his in order to rediscover it in its depths, escaping the idolatrous force of the representation of the new and the other. Finally, just as Jesus does not test the love of the Father according to an abstract parameter, so Innocent always returns home and falls in love with his own wife. In extreme synthesis, he remains in the place and in the concrete dimension where he is, travelling within it, letting himself be drawn by that attraction to the infinite that is the deepest trace of the divine filiation in us.

In this way Innocent refutes the idea that the limited can fill the infinite desire of his heart. And so he is truly adult because he is a son, capable of being a husband and father. In the narration of which he is the protagonist, one can read an authentic love for daily life, as a place of encounter with the infinite. Prose becomes, evangelically, poetry.12

Faced with eternity, which is “the largest of the idols—the mightiest of the rivals of God” (267), Innocent defines himself as “a man who left his own house because he could no longer bear to be away from it” (264–5) and claims to have become a pilgrim to heal from being exiled. And the exile to which he refers is that caused by the “the holy homesickness that forbids us rest” (266) of which his grandmother spoke to him, referring to the strangeness of human life full of enchantment and dissatisfaction.

Thus, two fundamental passages of the novel can be read in all their strength. The first explains the profound reason for the journey to find his wife, from a beginning to a new beginning:

His tone was so queer and mystical that I felt impelled to ask him what he meant, and of what exactly I had convinced him.

“You have convinced me,” he said, with the same dreamy eye, “why it is really wicked and dangerous for a man to run away from his wife.”

“And why is it dangerous?” I inquired. “Why, because nobody can find him,” answered this odd person, “and we all want to be found.” (252–3)

This is how the perversity of the idols is revealed through their deception: the promise of a false beyond denies the very concreteness of one’s own filiation, because only those who love us can find us. We do not need to find, but to be found. The desire for infinity speaks of being children and, therefore, generated. Just as in the parable of the two Brothers (see Luke 15:11–32) the younger one, who asks his father for the inheritance, after following the illusion of a beyond made of expectations and ideas, discovers his true home in his return, so every man is called to be himself in what he is, in how God made him and where God placed him, with his neighbours, his real loves, and not through doctrines or abstract ideas.
The second fundamental point is the confrontation with the academic world. The words of the rector of the University of Breakespeare, at Cambridge, are as acute and poetic as they are ironic:

There is something pleasing to a mystic in such a land of mirrors. For a mystic is one who holds that two worlds are better than one. In the highest sense indeed, all thought is reflection. This is the real truth in the saying that second thoughts are best. Animals have no second thoughts; man alone is able to see his own thought double, as a drunkard sees a lamp-post. Man alone is able to see his own thought upside down as one sees a house in a puddle. This duplication of mentality, as in a mirror, is (we repeat) the inmost thing of human philosophy. (162)

The real philosophical duel between Innocent armed with a gun and poor Emerson Eames starts from a mystical and metaphysical position: the real reality is beyond and thought seeks it through reflection. The point is that this position is perverted by pessimism, which folds back on itself instead of reading this structure of thought in the light of filiation as a sign of the presence of the source of desire for infinity, which attracts to that beyond. The sequence of the reductionist operation is evident, as it is shown by the following quotes:

[T]he question [is] whether dons see double because they are drunk or get drunk because they see double. (163)

A puddle repeats infinity, and is full of light; nevertheless, if analyzed objectively, a puddle is a piece of dirty water spread very thin on mud. (163)

[T]he academic mind reflects infinity, and is full of light by the simple process of being shallow and standing still. (164)

All thinkers are pessimist thinkers. (167)

This is a fundamental point for grasping the Christological and eschatological message of the work: it is not enough to be amazed, even though it is at the root of human knowledge, but it is necessary to have something, or rather someone, to hold the tension between the finite and the infinite, protecting against pessimism. Aristotle places amazement at the basis of the metaphysical act, but also declares that being friends is impossible for old people and that lovers are ridiculous. Innocent, instead, immerses himself in the limit by keeping the tension towards the infinite, which arises from the desire for life caused by our being generated. One text is extremely significant in this regard:

“I don’t deny,” he said, “that there should be priests to remind men that they will one day die. I only say that at certain strange epochs it is necessary to have another kind of priests, called poets, actually to remind men that they are not dead yet. The intellectuals among whom I moved were not even alive enough to fear death. They hadn’t blood enough in them to be cowards. Until a pistol-barrel was poked under their very noses they never even knew they had been born. For ages looking up an eternal perspective it might be true that life is a learning to die. But for these little white rats it was just as true that death was their only chance of learning to live.” (227)

Rémi Brague wrote that the metaphysical question is no longer today a question about what being is, but even more radically about the convenience of being at all rather than disappearing in nothingness, a question that dramatically translates into a decision for or against generation (Brague 2018). In this context, thought is called to place itself at the service of life. But this requires that we risk our lives, as Innocent
does in the ‘duel’ with the rector. It is not only marriage that is ‘a duel to the death, which no man of honour should decline’ (276), but any true relationship is like this, for example the clashing meeting with Eames, in which Innocent himself risks his own life, to understand that living is marvellous just in testing the pessimism of the other. From here on, everything changes direction:

What I mean is that I caught a kind of glimpse of the meaning of death and all that. The skull and cross-bones, the *memento mori*. It isn’t only meant to remind us of a future life, but to remind us of a present life, too. With our weak spirits we should grow old in eternity, if we were not kept young by death. Providence has to cut immortality into lengths for us, as nurses cut the bread and butter into fingers. (181)

The final image is perfect from the theological perspective, because, through a maternal metaphor that can also be understood by a child, it presents eschatology as the presence of eternity in time, in the midst of buttered bread, in concrete and material existence, as daily as a snack. It is not an idea that refers to an afterlife, but the existing real person surprised by the depth that hides in his limited dimension. In this way, the gaze changes radically:

There are no such people. There’s a man; and whoever he is he’s quite different (307).

In order to explore this depth that characterizes the existing person, i.e. the real man, Innocent always gets back on the road, leaves from home to go right home, gets engaged with his wife, steals what is his own and unleashes the gun to give a thought of life to the scholar, previously trapped in pessimism. Christianity, in fact, speaks of the resurrection of bodies, of concrete existence, of personal history. Plato had already come to tell us that the soul is immortal and that ideas are imperishable. Here, instead, a salvation is revealed that is not limited to the universal, but impregnates matter, the flesh, the body, with time and all the particularities that distinguish it:

I mean that if there be a house for me in heaven it will either have a green lamp-post and a hedge, or something quite as positive and personal as a green lamp-post and a hedge. I mean that God bade me love one spot and serve it, and do all things however wild in praise of it, so that this one spot might be a witness against all the infinities and the sophistries, that Paradise is somewhere and not anywhere, is something and not anything. And I would not be so very much surprised if the house in heaven had a real green lamp-post after all. (267)

Thus, the absolution with which this happy process ends, including, as in an embrace, the beautiful apocalypse, that is the beautiful ‘revelation’ that is offered though Innocent’s presence, frees the people of Beacon House from the slavery of idols, of representations, of fears, of conventions, to restore them the grace of their identities.

It should be noted that, as Michael Moon explicitly states, *Manalive*, this great green figure, is a symbol (132). He wanted to be tried, he comes precisely to be brought to trial by those people he wants to free (133). That is why he is not afraid and does not care, as a child.

4. Conclusion: the truth of the fables

At the end of the proposed path, therefore, it emerges how the symbolic-paradoxal narrative of Chesterton, in this novel as in other of his writings, refers to the enigma of
the relationship, which Christianity consists in the filial relationship to the Father that Jesus communicates to man. The paradox lies precisely in the excess of reality and presence over the purely intellectual dimension. In fact, ‘Riddles are easy to remember because they are hard to guess’ (131).

The narrative therefore systematically puts the closure of thought into crisis through the presence of a man who lives by grace, who is faithful to the newness of life that he constantly finds and seeks in the world. From this point of view it can be concluded that Innocent Smith, of whom it is said that ‘he is indeed a Man and he is truly alive’ (244) so much so that his real name must be written all attached (136 and 307), is a symbol of the desire for the Risen Christ that man, every man, always carries in his heart. Without Him the imbalance between the desire for ontological infinity that marks the human heart and the metaphysical finitude of the world would be a condemnation. But if Chesterton is right, if his narration is as true as the fables of which he speaks in his autobiography (Chesterton 1937, 47–48), then being a man is a grace because being born means being generated. This brings with it the real ability to live in a relationship that ensures the impossibility of getting lost in the limit, because there is always someone who can find us.

Notes

1. All quotations of the work are taken from the John Lane edition of 1912. The author is grateful to the remarks of the anonymous reviewers who helped to improve the final version of the manuscript.
2. The attention to the living being in the present reading of G.K. Chesterton’s Manalive should not be misunderstood as a reference to vitalism.
3. On Chesterton’s life, see Dale (1982), Ffinch (1986), Coren (1990), Pearce (1996).
4. For this reason, the analysis is limited to the reading of Manalive, without reference to the other numerous works of the author, a task that would have required also an approach in the line of literary criticism.
5. On this important aspect of G.K. Chesterton’s thought, see Kenner (1947). More in general, for the theological perspective, see Lorizio (2001).
6. “His creed of wonder was Christian by this absolute test; that he felt it continually slipping from himself as much as from others.” (Chesterton 1912, 227). Gregory of Nyssa wrote that only wonder knows, see In Canticum, GNO VI, 358, 12-359, 4.
7. G.K. Chesterton was deeply interested in heresy. The point here is just the basis of heresy itself from a theological point of view, see Maspero (2015).
8. “What is important about Manalive is that it is a statement of the author’s firm belief in his own need of verbal communication, and in his role of man as a literary artist and critic. It not only sets the pattern for all his later work, but also includes within it the root of his mature political, social and critical thought” (Hunter 1979, 97).
9. In reading this contribution, it could be useful to bear in mind William Oddie’s statement that Chesterton studies are in their infancy (Oddie 2009, 12–13).
10. “Moses,” said Moon with solemn fervour. “You are the incarnation of Common Sense. You think Mr. Innocent is mad. Let me introduce you to the incarnation of Scientific Theory. He also thinks Mr. Innocent is mad” (121).
11. “Aristotle had already told us that our minds are made to know all that is. Christian revelation in this sense is Aristotelian, only with the added surprise that we are to know God, Who is. Chesterton certainly saw the big things, the higher things, but, uniquely, he saw them in whatever was around him, in the tiny things, the small things. In some proper sense, it is as much a wonder that a flower exists or that we exist, as that the
universe exists. Chesterton never lets us forget that if we start with the flower, or with ourselves, we will eventually find all things, including why anything is at all” (Schall 2000, 224).

12. Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer wrote that “the Christian vocation consists of making heroic verse out of the prose of each day.” (Escrivá de Balaguer 1972, 116).

13. Cfr. Aristotele, Nicomachean Ethics, 1157.b e 1159.ab.

14. “Chesterton has that unusual and wonderful quality of allowing us to open ourselves to reality, even when we have chosen to cut ourselves off from it.” (Schall 2000, 225)

15. This does not take away the mysterious dimension of death, which is not known in life, as Michael Moon explains to those who tell him that it is a fact of experience (149): “It’s very dangerous, though, when a man thinks for a split second that he understands death” (182).

16. On the theological scope of this result and its relation with Ratzinger’s theology, see Maspero (2014).

17. “Stick to the man who looks out of the window and tries to understand the world. Keep clear of the man who looks in at the window and tries to understand you” (309).

18. “That Chesterton’s potentiality, had he chosen to be an artist, lay in the direction not of drama but of myth, is another way of saying that with his secure metaphysical perception he would have found his true fulfilment as a great philosopher. The times, however, and his sense of immediate duty, were against him; that he preferred instead to be a practical mystic whose vast moral vision was to be placed at the daily service of immediate political and educational ends, is matter both for gratitude and regret” (Kenner 2006, 27) (See also Wild 2013).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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