

Perception Attentive and Tremendous Trifles

Epigraphs

“Little pen, be good and flow with ink (which you do not always do) so that I may tell you what came to me once in a high summer and the happiness I had of it.” (Hilaire Belloc, “The Place Apart,” an essay to be found in Chapter XIX, on pages 162-169, in Hilaire Belloc's own 1912 Authorial Anthology, *This and That and The Other* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, a 1968 Reprint of the 1912 Original Essay), p. 162.

“These **fleeting sketches**....amount to no more than a sort of **sporadic diary**...—the only kind of diary the author has ever been able to keep. Even that diary he could only keep by **keeping it in public** [*i.e.*, in published essays]. But trivial as are the topics they are not utterly without a **connecting thread of motive**. As **the reader's eye** strays, with hearty relief, from these pages [of essays], it **probably alights on something**, a bed-post or a lamp-post, a window blind or a wall. It is a thousand to one that the reader is **looking** at something that he has **never seen**; that is, **never realized**....**He does not know what the post or wall mean....even in the form of a summary**....**None of us think enough of these things on which the eye rests**. But don't let the eye rest. Why should the eye be so lazy? **Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see startling facts** that run across the landscape **as plain as a painted fence**....**Let us learn to write essays on a stray cat or a coloured cloud**. I have attempted some such thing in what follows; but anyone else may do it better, if anyone else [such as my friend, Mr. Belloc] will only try.” (G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen & Company, 1909), the Preface, 1 Paragraph.)

“I need scarcely say that I am the pigmy [not the giant in the story]. The only excuse for the scraps [short essays] that follow is that they show what can be achieved with a commonplace existence and the sacred spectacles of [imaginative] exaggeration. The other great literary theory, that which is roughly represented by Mr. Rudyard Kipling, is that we moderns are to regain the primal zest by sprawling all over the world growing used to travel and geographical variety, being at home everywhere, that is being at home nowhere. Let it be granted that a man in a [formal Victorian-Edwardian] **frock coat** is a heart-rending sight [in Central Africa]; and the two alternative methods [literary theories and attitudes] still remain. Mr. Kipling's school advises us to go to Central Africa **in order to find** a man **without** a frock coat. The

school to which I belong suggests that we should stare **steadily** at the man [as did the discerning Father Brown!] until we see the man **inside** the frock coat. If we stare at him long enough he may even be moved to take off his coat to us; and that is a far greater compliment [and self-revelation] than his taking off his hat. In other words, we may, **by fixing our attention [hence our gaze] almost fiercely on the facts actually before us**, force them [the facts] to give up **their meaning** and fulfil **their mysterious purpose**. The purpose of the Kipling school [however] is to show how many extraordinary things a man may see if he is active and strides from continent to continent like the giant in my tale. **But the object of my school** is to show how many extraordinary things **even a lazy and ordinary man** may see **if he can spur himself to the single activity of seeing**. For this purpose I have taken the laziest person of my acquaintance, that is myself; **and made an idle diary** of such odd things as I have fallen over by accident, **in walking in a very limited area at a very indolent pace**. If anyone says that these are **very small affairs [and “trifles”] talked about in very big language**, I can only **gracefully compliment** him upon **seeing** the joke [and the enlivening paradox!].... **The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.**” (G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen & Company, 1909), from Chapter 1, entitled “Tremendous Trifles.”)

“I invariably ended up [in the 1950s] between the two fronts [the university and the professional teacher-training academy]...On the one hand it seemed to me that the difference between a university, which in principle was based on research, and an educational establishment primarily offering a professional training was completely evident. On the other hand, my own experience had strengthened the conviction that the Pedagogical Academy which...was also based on the mother tongue [the German language], by its very nature possessed a better chance—in comparison with the universities—of providing an academic education for the people, *i.e.*, using the word 'academic' **in its strictest sense as meaning 'philosophical' [or 'anti-Sophistical']**. For example, the task of preparing teachers at primary school for their career involved (and still involves) **the obvious necessity of converting the multilingual existence of the Western intellectual heritage into the living form of the German language**. The same applies also to the findings of modern research in the natural sciences, which are expressed primarily in abstract formulae. And this constraint [the needed conversion of formulae into plain language] seemed to me to be precisely the opposite of a limitation. **Only our mother tongue, which has been developed down through history and is influenced above all by dialect and poetic language, normally opens up to us the depths of reality in which we can come to sense the world as a whole and have direct access to insights which determine the course of our lives.**

“**The difficulty of avoiding** both foreign language **terminological jargon and unacceptable oversimplification** [thus the **fashionable 'lingo'**] has always exercised me [*i.e.*, “the full range of my faculties along lines of excellence”]. And so I have quite regularly set out to see whether I could make myself comprehensible, in my philosophizing, to the ordinary listener who was not professionally trained—and possibly to 'everyman'. **The ambition which lay behind this [effort] was one of the fruits of my dealings with American students** [while being a visiting professor at

Notre Dame and Stanford University], **an advantage** which I would like some of my eloquent [German] colleagues to have had—even if I was sometimes pushed close to despair through [and by] the childish [childlike] tenacity of **the recurring question: *What does it mean?***” (Josef Pieper, *Not Yet the Twilight: An Autobiography 1945-1964* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2017), pages 176-177—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original: “*What does it mean?*”)

In light of the concept and reality of “tremendous trifles” — as resonantly presented (and variously illustrated) by G.K. Chesterton himself — we are now encouraged to add one of Hilaire Belloc's own evocative essays for our consideration. Belloc's presentation of nature and silence and a grateful sense of benediction is cumulatively alluring and is contemplatively entitled “The Place Apart.”¹ We hope thereby to impart a fortifying conviction that Belloc's own gradually unfolding experience — alone in nature, and afoot — also helps to convey Chesterton's own distinctive expressions of a deeper meaning and radiating purpose to be found and nourished by the refreshing little things of moment to man — such as the clear flow of a brook and the quiet beauty of a newly discovered and well-shielded valley.

Moreover, in the early 1980s, the learned Father John Hardon, S.J. once memorably discussed with me Chesterton's profound paradoxical concept of “**tremendous trifles.**” He then made me much more aware of just how one's own often unrecognized deeper **presuppositions** — one's logical **premises** and fundamental **criteria** and standards of judgment — affect the alertness and mental focus of one's own **perceptions**: to include one's contemplatively receptive and refreshingly grateful perceptions. We also then spoke about Chesterton's exemplary presentation of the acute perceptiveness invariably shown by Chesterton's own Father Brown in the Father Brown Mystery Stories, which are so much more than “detective stories.” For, Father Brown, from his long experience in the interior forum in Sacramental Confession, had learned so much about human nature, to include its ruses and self-deceptions and crafty forms of evasion. And he also thereby learned to notice attentively the little things of significance in our life and thus the lowly persons whom others overlooked in the hurry and insensitive indifference of modern civilization.

Let us now follow what Hilaire Belloc significantly perceives amidst the hills of home, or nearby. We may then come to see that, in less than seven short and vivid pages, Belloc conveys with gratitude

1 Hilaire Belloc, *This and That and The Other* (Freeport, New York: Book for Libraries Press—Essay Index Reprint Series, Reprinted 1968 and first Published in 1912), Chapter XIX (“The Place Apart”), pages 162-169. All further references will be to this edition, and the specific page references will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay.

the unexpected benedictions he had cumulatively and so rootedly received. The solitude and the silence especially stirred his perceptiveness. From his discovered little Valley — and by way of contrast — he could also see “a plain whereon **I could see**, further and further off to a very distant horizon, cities and fields **and the anxious life of men.**” (169—my emphasis added) Belloc, as always, does not allow us to forget these other less contemplative, and much sterner, parts of human life.

After intimately speaking by way of exhortation to his “Little Pen” (162) and its hopefully reliable Flowing Ink, Belloc begins his somewhat teasing narrative by setting the scene of his now already foretold, but then unexpected, happiness and its warming season of the year:

One Summer morning [in early June] as I was wandering from one house to another [near a little river] among the houses of men, I lifted up [ascended] a bank from a river to a village and good houses, and there I was well entertained [perhaps at an Inn with its warmly welcoming Hospitality]. I wish I could recite the names of those chance companions, but I cannot, for they did not tell me their names [nor did I ask?]. June was just beginning in the middle lands where there are vines, but not many, and where the look of the stonework is still northern. The place was not very far from the Western Sea. (162)

Belloc, while noting many little details of the landscape, provides us with some further facts:

The [riparian] bank on which the village stood above that [unnamed] river had behind it a solemn slope of woodland leading up gently to where, two miles or more away, yet not three hundred feet above me, the new green of the tree-tops made a line across the sky. Clouds of a little, happy, hurrying sort ran **across the gentle blue of that heaven**, and I thought, as I went onward into the forest upland, that **I had come to very good things**: but indeed I had [also] come to things **of a graver kind**. A path went on athwart the woods **and upwards....and the height was lonely when I reached it, as though it were engaged in a kind of contemplation.....**Men had not often come that way, and those men [were] only **the few of the countryside**. (162-163—my emphasis added)

Belloc then found small pockets of open space after his climbing through the undergrowth and the irregularly marked path:

The new leaves [of early summer] were opened all about me, and there was a little breeze....At the summit was **first one small clearing and then another** in which coarse grass grew high **within the walls of trees....**Just where the slope [from the summit] began to go downwards..., these **little clearings ceased and the woods closed in again. The path**, or what was left of it, **wholly failed**, and **I had to push my way through** many twigs and **interlacing brambles**, **till** in a little while the forest **ceased abruptly** upon the edge of a falling sward, **and I saw before me the Valley**. (163-164—my emphasis added)

Recalling the nearby river he had earlier crossed that morning, and making some detailed and

nuanced perceptions, he judged that “the floor” of that gracious Valley “must have lain higher than that river” (164), for from the “moor” behind him his “descent had been gentle” and then “**the Valley opened** to the right [eastward] at my issue [coming out] from the wood...and so away northwards [into] **the pleasant empty dale.**” (164—my emphasis added) Belloc thus chooses to tell us more:

Let me describe it. **Upon** the further bank [of the river] (for it was not steep enough to call it a wall), the **western bank which shut the valley in**, grew a thick growth of low chestnuts with here and there a tall silver birch standing up among them....and the chestnuts made **a dark belt** from which **the tall graces of the birches lifted. The sunlight** [to the west] **was behind that long afternoon of hills.**

Opposite [to that look westward], **the higher eastern slope** [of the Valley] **stood full though gentle to the glorious light**, and it was all **a rise of pasture land....The height of the eastern boundary** [of the Valley] **was enough to protect the hollow below, but not so high as to carry any sense of savagery. It warned rather than forbade the approach of human kind.** (164-165—my emphasis added)

Belloc characteristically evokes history amidst his careful descriptions of geography, to include strategic topography. And he often adds the warmer touches of hoped-for hospitality:

These rocks [in the sunlight] **were warm and mellow....**Between it [the eastern slope and boundary] and its opposing [westward] wooded fellow, **the narrowing floor of that Eden lay**: winding, closing slowly, until it [“the Valley”] ended in **a little cuplike pass, an easy saddle of grass** where the two sides of the valley **converged** upon its northern conclusion [outlet of the valley]. (165—my emphasis added)

Belloc then had a memorable view of “this pass” down the valley over the low saddle that stood before him:

This pass was perhaps four miles away from me as I gazed, or perhaps a little less. The sun as I have said was shining [“warm and mellow”] upon all this: it made upon **the little cuplike place [apart]** a gentle **shadow** and a gentle **light**, both curved [just] as the light might fall low **and aslant upon a wooden bowl clothed in soft green cloth.** This was a lovely sight, and it invited me to go forward [through the valley].

Therefore I went down the sward that fell from the abrupt edge of the wood, and set out to follow northward along the lower grass of **this single [unique] and most unexpected vale.**

So strange was the place, even at this first sight, that I thought to myself: “I have happened upon one of those holidays [like those “holy days”] **God gives us.**” For we cannot give ourselves holidays: nor, if we are slaves, can our masters give us holidays, **but God only**: until at last we lay down the business [all of our active earthly life and anxiety] and leave our work for good and all....Anyhow, **the Valley was a wonder to me** there. It was **not as are common and earthly things. There was a peace about it which was not a mere repose, but rather something active which invited and intrigued.** The meadows **had a summons in them;** and all was

completely still. (165-167—my emphasis added)

Our grateful and poetic wanderer in the Valley proceeds to give more nuances of his refreshing perceptions and wonder:

I heard no birds from the moment I left the woodland [above], but **a little brook, not shallow, ran past me for a companion** as I went on. It made no murmur, but **it slid full and at once mysterious and prosperous, brimming up** to the rich fields on either side [of the murmur-less brook]....The pasture was not mown yet it was short....there was no trace of herds anywhere....No wind moved it [the grass].

There were no divisions **in this little kingdom**; there were **no walls or fences or hedges**: it was all one field, with the woods upon the western slope to my left [going northward], and the tilted green of the **eastern ridge** to my right **on which the sunlight softly and continually lay**. Never have I found [in all my many wanderings] **a place so much its own master and so contentedly alone**. (167—my emphasis added)

We may well imagine the grateful serenity Belloc so unexpectedly discovered and abidingly cherished — although he knew that for him, as a chance Wayfarer, it could not be otherwise truly enduring. Thus he goes on to consider, with a hint of the elegiac, this precious gift from God which was to him (and for him) such a restorative benediction:

If anybody owned that Valley, blessed be that man, **but if** no man owned it, and only God, **then I could better understand the benediction** which it [gracefully] imposed [bestowed] on me, a chance wanderer, **for something little less than an hour**. Here was **a place [apart]** where thought settled upon itself, and was **not [anxiously] concerned with unanswerable things**; and here was **a place [apart]** in which **memory did not trouble one with the incompleteness of [my] recent trial**, but rather **stretched back to things so very old that all the sense of evil [the grievous injustice] had been well purged out of it**. The **ultimate age** of the world which is also **its youth, was here securely preserved**. I was **not** so foolish [however] as to attempt a **prolongation** of this blessedness: **these things are not for possession: they are an earnest** [a pledge, a promise, and a foretaste] only of things [in Beatitude] we **may perhaps** possess [and enjoy], but not while this business [of our mortal life] is on. (168—my emphasis added)

After this gratefully tentative and somewhat taciturn evocation of some of the hoped-for ultimate things, Hilaire Belloc will bid us farewell — with a characteristically sobering and yet nobly elegiac, not just melancholic, tone:

I went along [that Valley] at a good sober pace of travelling, taking care to hurt no blossom with my [walking] staff and to destroy no living thing, whether of leaves [the early summer leaves] or of those that have movement. So I went until I came to the low pass [on the saddle] at the head of the place [to the north], and when I had surmounted it I looked down at a steep great fall [northwards] into quite another land.

I had come to a line where met two provinces, two different kinds of men, and this second valley was the end of one [of them]. The moor [at the pass]...upon the further [northwards] side fell away and away distantly, till at its foot it struck a plain whereon I could see further and further off to a very distant horizon, cities and fields and the anxious life of men. (168-169)

This last inchoate contrast thus takes us gratefully back to that earlier place apart and its benediction. Though it was apparently to be brief, Belloc showed his own attentive perceptions of what his beloved friend G.K. Chesterton — or Father Brown himself — would call “a tremendous trifle.”

Now, we may conclude with some comparable insights from a young French woman, who was a Greek Scholar and teacher of Mathematics — and who had a deep heart for the sufferings of others, especially for the broken of the world; with herself dying young (at only 34 years of age) in 1943 during World War II. She wholeheartedly understood, in her own accent and tone, the meaning of “tremendous trifles.” All her young life (born in 1909), she was earnestly engaged in noticing and alleviating the true suffering of others, and loyally doing it with sincerity and attentive compassion.

As we have tried to show in this short essay, Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, Josef Pieper, “Father Brown,” Father John Hardon, S.J., as well as Simone Weil, counterpoint and complement each other in a generous and unexpectedly illuminating ways, so that we may, perhaps, now better come more gratefully to know the deeper meaning of these little things, the “tremendous trifles,” which are sometimes also of momentous implication — if we have, as it were, the right criterion. In their alertly perceptive detections of the uncommonly significant little things, and through their own eloquent expressions of some of those “tremendous trifles,” they all seem to have somehow first sought and then more fully desired to share with us — with grateful humility — a deeper set of illuminating “criteria” and “standards” for ourselves, ones that have continued to refresh and to enhance our lives in our own slowly fruitful, attentively receptive, contemplation of the Divine Creation of Nature and of Grace.

CODA

Development of the Faculty of Attention: Insights of Simone Weil² to Contemplate Attentively

From her “*Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*”:

The key to a Christian conception of studies is **the realization that prayer consists**

2 Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God,” in *Simone Weil Reader* (Edited by George A. Panichas) (Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), pp. 44-46 and 51-52, to be found in Part 1, Chapter 3. See also Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), pp. 105-116. The original French title is *L'Attente de Dieu* and Simone Weil's specific essay on developing the faculty of attention—as translated by Emma Craufuld—is entitled “*Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vu de l'amour de Dieu*.”

of attention. It is **the orientation of all the attention** of which the soul is capable **toward God.** **The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of prayer.** **Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.**

The highest part of the attention only makes **contact** with God, when prayer is intense **and pure enough** for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is **turned** toward God.

Of course school exercises only develop **a lower kind of attention.** Nevertheless, they are extremely **effective in increasing the power of attention** that will be available at the time of prayer, **on condition that** they [“school exercises”] are carried out with a view to this purpose [of prayer] and this purpose alone.

Although people seem to be unaware of it today, **the development of the faculty of attention** forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies. Most school tasks have a certain intrinsic interest as well, but such an interest is secondary. All tasks that really call upon the power of attention are interesting for the same reason and to an almost equal degree.

School children and students who love God should never say: “For my part, I like mathematics”; “I like French”; “I like Greek.” **They should learn to like all these [school] subjects, because all of them develop the faculty of attention which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer.**

If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry, this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On the contrary it is almost an advantage.

It does not even matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so. **Never in any case whatever is a genius effort of the attention wasted.** It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, **for all spiritual light lightens the mind.**

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have **nevertheless** been making progress each minute of that hour **in another more mysterious dimension.** Without out knowing or feeling it, **this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul.** **The result will one day be discovered in prayer.** Moreover, it may very likely be felt **in some department of the intelligence** in no way connected with mathematics. **Perhaps** he who made the unsuccessful effort will **one day be able to grasp the beauty of a line of Racine more vividly** on account of it. **But it is certain that this effort will bear its fruit in prayer.** There is no doubt whatever about that....

The best support for faith is the guarantee that if we ask our Father for bread, he does not give us a stone. Quite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in **making an effort of attention** with the sole idea [purpose] **of increasing his grasp of truth,** he acquires a **greater** aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no **visible** fruit....

There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention. It is really **light that is**

desired if all other incentives are absent. **Even if our efforts of attention** seem for years to be producing no result, **one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul**. Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away. The useless **efforts made by the Curé d'Ars**, for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn Latin **bore fruit in the marvelous discernment that enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences**.

Students must therefore work...applying themselves...to all their tasks, with the idea that each [task of effort] will help **to form in them the habit of that attention** which is the substance of prayer....Our deep purpose should aim solely at **increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer**...Above all it is thus that we can acquire [with the help of grace?] the virtue of humility....

Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in **developing this power of attention**. No doubt they are no nearer to goodness than their brothers working in fields or factories. They are near in a different way....in the endurance of long drawn-out sufferings. **If, however, we consider the occupations in themselves, studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their soul**. Whoever has gone through years of study without developing this attention has lost a great treasure.

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but [except for] **people capable of giving them their attention**. **The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing**; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. **Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough**.

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail (the miraculous vessel that satisfies all hunger **by virtue of the consecrated Host**) belongs to the **first comer** [such as Parzival the Knight] **who asks** the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, **"What are you going through?"**....**It is a recognition that the sufferer exists**, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but **as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction**. **For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way**.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents **in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth**.

Only he who is capable of attention can do this.

So it comes about that, **paradoxical as it may seem**, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, **may be of great service one day, provided** we devote **the right kind of effort** to them. **Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us [as with the Curé d'Ars] better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need**.

For an adolescent, **capable** of grasping this truth **and generous enough** to desire **this fruit** [of attentive charity] above all others, studies could have their fullest spiritual effect [*sub Gratia Divina?*]....(pp.44-46 and 51-52—my emphasis added)

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