Tremendous Trifles

Essay · 5 min read

"...being at home everywhere, that is being at home nowhere."

Tremendous Trifles, written by G. K. Chesterton in 1909, is a very curious book. Chesterton, who wrote poetry, biography, detective stories and literary criticism over his life, shows plainly in this book why he was called the "Prince of Paradox," and in 39 different pieces he tries to show his readers very different sides of life. The book of short pieces is proof not only of how differently the written language can be used, but of how differently literary ideas can be read. And the angles it offers are so strange that, more than a hundred years after it was written, it still manages to surprise its readers.

What is more, it surprises the reader through things we never think about, or never have to think about, except perhaps in the first piece. What it describes goes no further than a piece of chalk, lying in bed or losing a simple game. That is exactly where the whole importance of the book lies. Just as we forget why we do the things we have learned by heart, it draws attention to the things we do every day without thinking. Because Chesterton knows that these learned-by-heart habits gather, day after day, into an instinct that resists being thought about. So he brings out the great meanings spread beneath tremendous trifles. He pushes aside the meanings that are easy to be fooled by and leaves in your palm the small meaning that lies, bright and beautiful, at the centre of the truth.

The first piece in the book is really a small warning: that the pages ahead will write about the trivial things of daily life in a grand language. Chesterton knows he is talking about simple things. And this is also where the author's greatest pride lies. He insists that building a great work by gathering small things is no less important than making marvellous discoveries. After all, even small matters can be too big to get out from under, depending on the scale you look at them from.

"If anyone says that these are very small affairs talked about in very big language, I can only gracefully compliment him upon seeing the joke."

And the first piece can be seen as a summary of the whole book in essence. A small likeness of Chesterton's mind, for which "molehills are mountains; one has only to become a pigmy like Peter to discover that." So it is a very successful way to open the book.

His point that we cannot find the true meaning of life by travelling the whole world as a giant makes a marvellous foundation for the book. The devil's pride, after all, was not in his size. When he took Christ to the top of the mountain and showed him all the kingdoms stretched out beneath his feet, he boasted of how small people were. So we must focus our attention, tremendously, on "the thing." We must not see the thing as small. Instead we must become small and study the thing, before everything else, even before ourselves. So that in the end the thing must break open and reveal the reality inside its mysterious contents. This makes it even clearer that the real matter here is seeing. Even the laziest person, lying in bed and watching the white ceiling with nothing but the wish to bring out what the thing contains, will find the reality in the end. For is the white ceiling, in all its splendour and glory, not a likeness of the sky we never reach?

Chesterton treats the opening piece in the same way. Just as someone who tries to make everywhere home is in truth homeless, he stresses that whoever looks for the meaning of everything will be left with none. He gives a fine example of how a lazy and clever person can draw meanings just by sitting and watching. The point is not to chase meaning by taking on every "thing" in a great frenzy, only to end up buried under all of them. What we really have to do is take the smallest piece of a thing within reach, and weigh it, prod it and take it apart thoroughly, not only in its material whole but in its metaphysical one too. And here the unusual point of view of a writer parts ways with the reader. This is where it starts to mean something that we stand on this side of the page, and the writer on the other.

Since Chesterton did not know anyone lazier than himself, the things he takes up are the things he did every day without exception. In fact it is plain how demanding a choice this is. The mind, after all, has to filter. In our physical universe, where only as much of the outside world is taken in as needs to be, much lies beyond the edge of perception: breathing, seeing

colours, a stain on the paper of a train ticket. This is what Chesterton manages to do differently from the reader. He opens his mind, steps out through the door of perception, and prods what lies beneath these acts. And, not surprisingly, he finds a treasure there. A treasure far greater than words, at that. He discovers meanings and ideas worth more than anything the human mind tries to force into moulds.

In the end, it will not be the giants who cross continents in a single stride who see beauty and truth, but the dwarfs who, small as they are, stand right at the heart of the whole. When anthills are mountains that touch the clouds, when we grasp the meaning of the things we do every day without thinking, and when we look around us not for marvels but to find a single marvel, then we will grasp the meaning of life. The things we look at with all our attention will pour out what is inside them, and tremendous trifles will turn out to be living itself. So for someone who knows how to see, even if they are the laziest person in the world, beautiful things are waiting somewhere out there. Waiting to be given meaning, to be studied, and to open up to those who see the beauty inside them.

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Translated from my Turkish original for this site. Chesterton is quoted in his own words, from the Project Gutenberg edition of Tremendous Trifles.