

# The Return to Hugo: A Discussion of the Intellectual Context of Chesterton's View of the Grotesque.

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## The Return to Hugo: A Discussion of the Intellectual Context of Chesterton's View of the Grotesque

John Coats

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

86 THE RETURN TO HUGO: A DISCUSSION OF THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF CHESTERTON'S VIEW OF THE GROTESQUE By John Coats (Scarborough, England) Borges' important short piece on Chesterton singles out, probably rightly, the two critical studies with which Chesterton made his literary debut as in some way typical of his essential nature: His personality leaned towards the nightmarish, something secret, blind and central. Not in vain did he dedicate his first works to the justification of two great Gothic craftsmen, Browning and Dickens. Most readers interested in Chesterton, while grateful for this contribution to the recent increase of serious attention he has been getting, are likely to feel that Borges' reading of Chesterton's innermost spirit is wrong. Yet, they might accept that while the conclusion is false, the area of

emphasis is correct. Much of vital significance about Chesterton is displayed in those combative, deliberately controversial rehabilitations, a concern, above all, with the grotesque, in experience and in art. I wish to explore Chesterton's view of the grotesque in its intellectual context, especially his return to the first formulations and spirit of Victor Hugo, which had been either forgotten or misinterpreted by his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. In his two early critical forays, on Browning and Dickens, Chesterton engaged in a number of tasks. Both books were obviously and successfully rescues: of Dickens, from critics or defenders who attacked or condoned his superficiality; of Browning, from those reverent admirers who insisted on his "profundity." Characteristically good tempered, they are outstanding examples of literary polemic, the overwhelmingly convincing demolition of a false and timewasting view of a subject. Chesterton rendered it impossible to view Dickens or Browning as George Gissing or Professor Forman viewed them. Fruitful and important as this work of demolition was, it is, perhaps, less significant than Chesterton's deeper controversial intention. Beyond the removal of misconceptions about individual authors, the underlying direction of the two books is towards a wholesale examination and defense of the "larger than life" element in art. The studies of Browning and Dickens are seminal statements of Chesterton's aesthetic views. Conveniently they break the "larger than life" quality into two separate strands: the nature of fable, the basis of consideration in the work on Dickens, and the "grotesque," the primary subject of study in Robert Browning. Chesterton sees the grotesque as the proof of Nature's energy, or rather the energy of God in nature, "energy that takes its own forms and goes its own way." The grotesque is the refusal of the living force of nature to conform to narrow aesthetic views, the conventionally "beautiful" harmony of 87 proportion and form, the diluted heritage of Greek classicism. It is, too, evidence of an artistic energy which escapes jejune or limited notions of what is beautiful, those which concentrate on the supposed needs of civilized man, or defer to the received opinions of art critics. Readers will at once recall instances of Chesterton's excursions into this field in his very early work: *A Defence of Skeletons*, or *A Defence of Ugly Things*. (both 1900), first trace a tendency which was to undergo some alteration before it culminated in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) as a fictional concern, and in *On the Book of Job* (1929) in essay form. In *A Defence of Ugly Things* Chesterton, leaning (as we shall see) on Hugo's Preface to *Cromwell*, makes his most trenchant and direct attack on the Greek classical ideal of harmony and proportion. This short manifesto on behalf of the grotesque, among the very first of his articles published in *The Speaker*, is interesting because it stands at the start of his literary career, antedating even the book on Browning. He roundly attacks the classical ideal as "a worship of one aesthetic type alone." The Greeks "carried their police regulations into elfland" out of a timid avoidance of the wild ideas, the violent combinations of the imagination that mankind naturally loves. Consequently their fantasy is anaemic compared to fairy-tale or "Scandinavian story." "Who ever feels that the giants in Greek art and poetry were really big - big as some folk-lore giants have been?" Chesterton asks. 5...

THE RETURN TO NATURE: A DISCUSSION OF THE  
INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF CHESTERTON'S VIEW OF THE GROTESQUE

By JOHN GUNDS  
(Barnborough, England)

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His personality leaned towards the nightmarish, something secret, blind and central. Not in vain did he dedicate his first works to the justification of two great Gothic craftsmen, Browning and Dickens.<sup>1</sup>

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