

## BELLOC: AN APPRAISAL OF HIS POETRY

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## INTRODUCTION

Although Hilaire Belloc is considered one of the literary giants of the Catholic literary world of the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, comparatively little intensive study has been made of his writings. The majority of the criticisms that have been written concern his historical and religious writings.<sup>1</sup> As far as his poetry is concerned, there is no lengthy study of it anywhere, even though the critics have been almost unanimous in declaring it the most valuable and the most enduring of his writing.<sup>2</sup> Therefore as no parallel study to this one has been done, it is the writer's intention to study the poetry of Belloc, appraise it, show its literary value, its place in modern poetry and the likelihood of its survival.

Chapter 1 sets down the reasons why a study of Belloc's poetry has been undertaken - what the writers and reviewers say of it,<sup>2</sup> what he himself says of his own poetry and his right to hope for the immortality of his verse. The second chapter is a study of the thought contained in Belloc's prose writings, for it is impossible to appreciate the poetry unless

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1. Hill, Roland, "Hilaire Belloc", in the Ave Maria, Vol. 78: No. 12, Sept. 19, 1953, p 8-9-10.

Hamilton, Robert, "Hilaire Belloc: His Spirit and His Work", in the Irish Ecclesiastical Review, Vol. LXVI:1945, Woodruff, Douglas, "Hilaire Belloc", in the Tablet, Vol. 202, No. 5905, p. 76-84.

2. See Chapter II of this thesis.

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one has a clear idea of Belloc's philosophy, faith, loves, ideals and dual nationality.

The poetry can be divided into five classes - the Sonnets, the Songs and Ballades, the Epigrams and Satires, and the Child Verse; the fifth class comprises the important long poems. Each of the next five chapters deals with one of these classes and this forms the body of the thesis. Here it has not been the purpose to show that one of these forms is the most noteworthy or the most exalted in English literature. Rather it is to show that Belloc's contributions to the world of poetry are worthy of our praise and merit our study.

Chapter seven, which deals mainly with Belloc's final and most important single poem, "The Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine", makes an effort by means of a lengthy analysis of the poem, to show that it epitomizes the poetic theories, the philosophy and, indeed, even the whole life of the poet.

Until 1916 no biography of Belloc had appeared but at this time the first was published.<sup>3</sup> This was followed in 1945 by a lengthy criticism of Belloc's works in five parts,<sup>4</sup> the

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3. Mandell, C. Creighton and Edward Shanks, Hilaire Belloc, Methuen and Co., England, 1916.

4. Hamilton, Robert, "Hilaire Belloc: His Spirit and His Work", in the Irish Ecclesiastical Record, (#5 The Poet) Vol. LXVI: 1945, p. 51-57.

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the best essay being on the poetry. Here Hamilton admits that he is not a specialist and therefore, as one might expect, the criticism is sketchy and unsympathetic. Since Belloc's death in July 1953, there has been a tremendous number of newspaper and magazine articles, both in America and England. Again we witness the preference for dealing with the prose but usually flavoured with praise for the verse. Renée Haynes has prepared a short work on Belloc<sup>5</sup> in which a good deal of reference has been made to the poetry. A study by Wilhelmsen,<sup>6</sup> biographies by Morton,<sup>7</sup> Marie Belloc-Lowndes,<sup>8</sup> and the Jebbs,<sup>9</sup> as well as the official biography, just off the press, by Robert Speaight,<sup>10</sup> all make abundant references to the poetry, but do not claim to be studying it intensively. Patrick Cahill,<sup>11</sup> (who has

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5. Haynes, Renée, Hilaire Belloc, No. 35 of a series "Writers and their Works", Longmans, Green and Co., London, England, 1953.

6. Wilhelmsen, Frederick, Hilaire Belloc: No Alienated Man, London, Sheed and Ward, 1954, 108 pages.

7. Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, London, Hollis and Carter, 1955, 181 p.

8. Belloc-Lowndes, Marie-Adelaide, The Young Hilaire Belloc, New York, Kennedy and Sons, 182 p.

9. Jebb, Eleanor and Reginald, Belloc the Man, The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1957, 169 p.

10. Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, London, Hollis and Carter, 538 p. ill., extensive bibliography, well indexed.

11. Cahill, Patrick, The English First Editions of Hilaire Belloc, London, published by the compiler, copyright 1953 by P.C. Cahill, 51 pages.

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compiled a list of English first editions, and to whom the bibliography of this thesis was sent) made the following statement in a letter to the writer:

The Bibliography here (Nonesuch edition of the Verse) is accurate but is not so in Haynes and Wilhelmsen. (No Alienated Man) Hayne's quotes are very inaccurate but the essay is well done. There is no way of finding out the dates when the poems were actually written, without considerable research. I hope to do this some day, but meanwhile if I can help with any particular poem, I'll do my best. 12

In a subject as personal as the evaluation of a writer's poetry, much of the interpretation is of necessity a subjective rather than an objective opinion. The biographies and articles have been used with a view to securing Belloc's opinions and beliefs. In the case of his own essays, they have been invaluable, for very often he has set down clearly his own personal views with regard to the various genres of poetry. The most important source for this thesis is, quite naturally, his own verse. There has been a number of editions of it since the first in 1896. The latest and supposedly complete collection was published in 1954. 13

During this era of the 20th century, permeated with a spirit of Unheimlichkeit, when Man is no longer at home, Hilaire

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12. Cahill, Patrick, quoted from a letter to the writer, August 11, 1955.

13. Roughead, W.N., editor, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Holland, the Nonesuch Press, MCMLIV, No. 1387.

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Belloc, particularly Belloc the poet, has become almost a monentity. His verse, written in the "great tradition" has nothing to offer to the modern mind searching for an analysis of the souls of all who pass by. But for those who are Christian in the truest sense of the word, Belloc, who has his roots in the soil, in his family, in his Faith, in Christianity, has a message. As his philosophy is reiterated in his poetry, and as poetry is the loftiest form of literary expression, we cannot fail to emerge a better person after a study of Belloc's verse. This, it is maintained, will be his claim for future immortality. Long after his un-annotated historical works have been relegated to the shelves of memory and the problems of his controversial tracts and pamphlets have been solved, people will hail the poet who wrote:

Lady and Queen and Mystery manifold  
 And very Regent of the untroubled sky,  
 Whom in a dream St. Hilda did behold  
 And heard a woodland music passing by;  
 You shall receive me when the clouds are high  
 With evening and the sheep attain the fold.  
 This is the faith that I have held and hold,  
 And this is that in which I mean to die. 14

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14. Roughead, W.N., editor, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, The Nonesuch Press, p. 128.

## CHAPTER ONE

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

On his sixtieth birthday, Belloc was feted at a dinner given by his friends. Chesterton made the presentation speech in which he said that Belloc's sonnets and strong verse would remain "like the cups and carved epics of the Greeks." Belloc replied, "with a sad good humour, saying that he found that by the age of sixty he did not care very much whether his verse remained or not. "But I am told" he added with reviving emphasis, "that you begin to care again frightfully when you are seventy. In which case I hope that I shall die at sixty-nine." There is a tone of banter here as if Belloc might be serious about his apparent nonchalance regarding his verse, but in too many instances do we see the opposite tone, to be able to regard his banter as fact.

As a child he early showed artistic preferences, among them drawing and verse. Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes relates that as a child of four he wrote much the same hand as did as an adult and that when impressed by some dramatic or unexpected event he would compose a set of verses astonishing both as to thought and diction in a child of his age. He preferred verse to any other form of reading and at the age of five his mother wrote in a letter that, at the moment, Hilaire was in a corner learning by heart, for his own pleasure, "The Lays of Ancient Rome."

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

2.

In a child with such a capacity for poetry we wonder how far his development would have carried him had there been the financial means to carry on his education; had his father not died while Hilaire was yet a child; had the Franco-Prussian War not robbed the Bellocs of much of their French fortune; had their mother's legacies not been swindled by the ne'er-do-well lawyer-son of a friend of hers; and had God spared to him his beloved wife. But the month to month fear of the poverty of his childhood and adolescence was followed after his marriage by the blows of material needs for his growing family - to whom he was so early to be both father and mother. He is quoted as remarking when asked why he wrote so steadily and worked so hard that his children were "howling for pearls and caviar." Therefore we may suppose that his epigram

I'm tired of Love; I'm still more tired of Rhyme,  
But Money gives me pleasure all the Time.

is merely a clever cover-up for what he truly feels.

Throughout his own writings and in the writings of others about his work, we find references to and his feelings towards his verse. J.B. Morton tells us in his memoirs that at the slightest provocation Belloc would punctuate a conversation with a bit of suitable verse, sing a song of his own making - music and words - or fashion an epigram as quickly as a flash, as on the day he is quoted as saying to Ramsay Mac Donald, "Take care lest I make you immortal with an epigram."

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

3.

We see that his verse came naturally to him. His sister writes of him that at eighteen he was already writing remarkable verse and that a poem written by him at that time has remained among his best work.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this, his mother's literary friends discouraged him and two editors to whom some of his verses were sent, wrote that they believed Hilaire Belloc would never become either a poet or a prose-writer.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless Belloc continued to write and by 1896 (Belloc gives the date as 1895<sup>3</sup>) at the age of twenty-six, he had published his first edition of Verses and Sonnets, followed by his Books of Beasts for children the same year, his Modern Traveller in 1898 and a Moral Alphabet in 1899.

No doubt it was between the years 1899 and 1907 that Belloc was forced to write to make money. For one whose dearest love was his verse, as he calls it, we can expect to find frequently a mood of rebellion in his writings against a life which demands incessant toil to gain a livelihood. We see this in his poem "Battersea Bridge" where, with a note of wistful longing in his voice, he asks:

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1. We think that the poem referred to here is "Homer" (1888) in the Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch edition, 1954, n.p. Vlll, p. 87.

2. But Wilfred Meynell C.B.E., editor of Merry England, published "Homer" in 1888, when Belloc was seventeen. (see note 1)

3. Cahill, Patrick, The English First Editions of Hilaire Belloc, London, the Whitecross Press, England, MCMXLIV, 51 p., p. 9, first entry.

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

4.

England, to me that never have malinguered  
 Nor spoken falsely, nor your flattery used,  
 Nor even in my rightful garden lingered:-  
 What have you not refused? <sup>4</sup>

People have interpreted this verse to mean that Belloc was in reality a Frenchman who had been forced through circumstances to dwell in England but Belloc himself told F.J. Sheed that he meant by "his rightful garden" the realm of poetry. <sup>5</sup>

But while Belloc turned out a seemingly endless flow of biography, history, essays and novels, his family, his friends - those who knew him best - had found his verse to be the pearl of great price. One of the first to see the worth of his poetry was Maurice Baring. He it was who prophesied that the poems in the first small edition of 1896 would be read long after most of the contemporary poetry had been forgotten. Belloc had no desire for fame as such, except as "a necessary weakness if good work is to go on being produced." However he made no secret of the fact that he hoped his verse would survive. But he treated the matter in a light-hearted way.

Morton tells us that when asked if he expected his verse to procure for him enduring fame, he replied, " quoting a wise man, ' I shall have as much fame as a dead man wants. ' " <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>.Roughead, W.N., editore, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc  
 The Nonesuch Press, England, MCMLIV, No. 1387, 269 pages, p.36

<sup>5</sup>.Sheed, F.J., "Belloc the Apologist", in the Tablet,  
 July 25, 1953, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>.Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, London,  
 England, Hollis and Carter, 181 pages.

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

5.

Belloc's poetry was not always the product of instantaneous composition, (one of the reasons, perhaps, that he did not write more) though he was quick at epigram and clever at repartee. It is quite believable that a theme might be in his mind for years and suddenly at some moment the whole poem would come rushing out. This idea is contained in a letter to a friend in which he said: "I only wish that I could write some verse as you so flatteringly advise me to do. But all my life it has been quite impossible for me to write verse except when a verse comes to me....I have always envied those who write verse more or less at will." <sup>7</sup>

In his obituary article, Douglas Hyde has written that Belloc has penned some of the most sublime verses to the Mother of God and the Mother of men, ever written. <sup>8</sup>

## In A Boat

Lady! Lady!  
Upon Heaven-height,  
Above the harsh morning  
In the mere light

.....

My body is frozen,  
My soul is afraid:  
Stretch out your hands to me,  
Mother and maid.

Mother of Christ,  
And Mother of me,

7. Feeney, L., "Belloc and Verse", in America, 57:164 M. 22, 1937.

8. Hyde, Douglas, "Remembers Hilaire Belloc's 80th Birthday Party", in the Canadian Register, 12th year, 8/8/54, p.4, col.7

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

6.

Save me alive  
From the howl of the sea.

If you will Mother me  
Till I grow old,  
I will hang in your chapel  
A ship of pure gold.<sup>9</sup>

Another obituary states that though Belloc had written one hundred and fifty-three books, he would be remembered not for the vast number of them, but for the happy gift of rhyme in the best of them.<sup>10</sup> Douglas Woodruff's eulogy contains one very superlative statement about the poetry, to the effect that

So universal is the acclaim today for Belloc's poetry that it is more useful here to devote these few lines to a reminder of how much else there is.<sup>11</sup>

In England of course, we must remember that Belloc's Child Verse was a nursery "must". Most of the English literary commentaries on Belloc's poetry mention the fact that so many children have familiarized themselves with the Rhinoceros, the Polar Bear and Matilda, who told lies, that it can be said that his "comic verse has enriched the nurseries of half a century."<sup>11</sup> Belloc knew, loved and understood children and one of the things he admired most in life was the innocence of little ones. Those who think of him as a historian and a politician dealing out

9. Roughead, W.N., The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, p. 39-40

10. "Perigord Between his Hands", in Time, July 27, 1953, Vol. 62, No. 4, p. 26.

11. Woodruff, Douglas, "Hilaire Belloc: A Tribute", in the Sunday Times, London, July 10, 1953.

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

7.

polemics to his adversaries can hardly visualize him as a friend of childhood. But one has only to read Naomi Mitchison's article written after his death,<sup>12</sup> to know that he not only cared, but cared immensely for the children of his neighbourhood as well as his own youngsters and grandchildren. So we can imagine the pleasure and the ease with which he penned such lines as

The Polar bear is unaware  
Of cold that cuts me through;  
For why? He has a coat of hair.  
I wish I had one too! <sup>13</sup>

Now that we have seen that Belloc's first love is his verse, we would expect that his heart would be in full accord with its dictates for "out of the heart, the mouth speaketh." And the heart that gave itself generously and publicly to Church and country, showing a love and loyalty almost unattainable by the ordinary rank and file, gave itself just as generously but less pompously to his poetry. Above all he wanted his writing to contain the Good, the Beautiful and the True and he says that it is the special business of writers to contribute to the triple task by putting forth the Beautiful.<sup>14</sup> What one finds

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12. Mitchison, Naomi, "Hilaire Belloc in Sussex", in the Manchester Guardian Weekly, July 30, 1953

13. Belloc, Hilaire, Cautionary Verses, Album Edition, Duckworth, 1951, p. 15 of the Bad Child's Book of Beasts.

14. Belloc, Hilaire, quoted by Brother Leo, in the Columbia, March 1930, from the New Statesman, December 7, 1929.

## BELLOC'S FIRST LOVE: HIS VERSE

8.

in the prose, one finds in the verse though more delicately tried and more finely soldered. With this in mind, then, we must examine the mine from which the metal is drawn; for only then shall we know if it is worthy of the immortality for which its goldsmith hoped.

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE THOUGHT IN BELLOC

When making a study of the meat contained in Belloc's poetry, we must, like the critics, undertake some short study at least of the prose writings, as one cannot be too easily divorced from the other. A study of the bibliography of his first editions <sup>1</sup> shows that Belloc built up a library of some one hundred and fifty volumes. Glancing over the titles, we see that he is well represented in every field, since his knowledge touches on them all. In the field of history he has written of France, England and Europe in general; biographies almost too numerous to catalogue here; military studies; polemics and the defense of the Catholic Church. In a lighter vein but with similar depth there are the essays, books of travel, fiction, satire, humour and poetry.

The background for his thought can be gleaned from the cosmopolitan character of his life and writings. Evidences of his dual nationality are everywhere. He is love with the English countryside, especially his beloved Sussex, and he is moved deeply by its landscape as well as its poetry. English too is his love of the sea, the country tavern and the joyous song over a tankard of beer. But his love for and praise of

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1. Cahill, Patrick, The English First Editions of  
 Hilaire Belloc, London, The Whitecross Press, 1953, 51 p.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

10.

wine is distinctly French, and elements of the style of Rabelais are present in both his prose and his poetry - his great jumbles of words, his elongated strings of adjectives, and his somewhat ludicrous telling of a story. He is French too, in his precision, logic, form and dislike of looseness in writing.

Born in France, Belloc served his conscript period for a year as a gunner in the army of the Republic. After the Lorraine manoeuvres of 1891 "his pay-book (which you can see at King's Land today) was marked with the report 'cannonier médiocre' " <sup>2</sup> But he never regretted the time spent in France for it gave him that knowledge of the French milieu which was indispensable to him in writing his historical biographies of French characters, and French geography and travel. No doubt it is due to his bilingualism that he went to the French writers for much of his inspiration. Among the historians, Michelet was his model "with the doctrine that good historical writing is a 'resurrection of the flesh.' " <sup>3</sup> He has great admiration for Molière and has devoted one of his essays to a discussion of his play "Le Misanthrope". In the play he admires Molière's ability to take the phrases of daily use and so use them to produce the most profound effect with simplicity of construction.

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2. "Hilaire Belloc at 80", in the Catholic Digest, May 17, 1952, p.7-11. Condensed from Picture Post, London, Hulton Press.

3. Roughead, W.N., "Hilaire Belloc's Thought and Writings" in the Times Literary Supplement, London, Eng., No. 2729, 21/5/52, p.1-3.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

11.

Such are the materials of the Misanthrope, common stones: and into them a man did once breathe such life that he made a thing standing quite apart from all his other creations...What suggestions to the left and right. <sup>4</sup>

Then we have Belloc's views expressed on what he considers so important in a literary piece - the universality of the theme.

There is perhaps no man intelligent and sensitive and having passed the age of forty who will not, as he watches the acting of the Misanthrope, see all that he knows passing before him and sounding exactly in tune with the vibrations of his own soul....There is all human story put into the little frame. <sup>5</sup>

The humility which he appreciates in Ronsard is part and parcel of the man Belloc. Mrs. Lowndes mentions in her autobiography that "never was a writer more humble about his work....than my brother Hilaire." in his essay on Ronsard he has said:

There is a kind of good humility about it (his creative power), the humility of a man who does not look too closely at himself, and the health of a soul at full stride, going forward. <sup>6</sup>

In his essay on José Maria Hérédia we read his thoughts on and his admiration for words so used that the total effect wrought with painstaking care gave the impression of chiselled marble.

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4. Morton, J.B. Ed., Selected Essays of Hilaire Belloc, The Misanthrope, London, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1950, p.38.

5. *ibid.*, p. 39

6. Hilaire Belloc: An Anthology of his Prose and Verse, W.N. Roughead, editor, Soho Square, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951, 283 p., p. 46.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

12.

The most important quality of the man, and that which appears everywhere in his writings is his deep and all-embracing Catholic faith. His appreciation of the Church was as that of a medievalist; its doctrines were intended to affect the whole structure of living. He set up for himself an ideal and, insofar as we can see, the thoughts he expresses in the following quotation are maintained throughout the whole course of his works.

"It is our business to give up all for whatever is truth, whether it appeals to our emotions or not; whether we have others with us or not; whether our mood concurs or repels. The intelligence is absolute in its own spheres." He was never fearful of admitting unpleasant truth and the human failing of Catholics while he defended the indefectible church of God, founded by Christ on St. Peter and his successors.<sup>7</sup>

In his book Europe and the Faith, the first of his defences, he traces the history of the Church through the Christian era. The new religion is adopted by the Roman Empire, and as a spiritual force perpetuates the culture and the civilization of ancient Greece and Rome. The thirteenth century was the height of its magnificence, the fourteenth its decline and the fifteenth its partial destruction. The Reformation, he shows, was iniquitous in its origins and is a record of abuses, auto-

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7. Southwark, Bishop of, "A Champion of the Church", in the Tablet, issue of July 25, 1953, Vol. 202, No. 5905, p. 83.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

13.

cratic kings wanting increase of power, and scavengers of the monarchs plundering monasteries and churches. An excellent summary of the meat of Europe and the Faith may be found in the following:

The most recurrent thesis of the author is that without England's successful example the Reformation would never have succeeded. Luther's success in the northern Germanies was ephemeral; this land...lay at the outposts of the empire and its defection was like that of an ill-taught neophyte. But England was 1,000 years holy in the Christian family. Its break...lent strength to Calvin's work on the continent and it offered an inviting precedent to greedy princelings everywhere.

Thirty-one years later, in his pamphlet "World Conflict", we find him battling for the Faith as forcefully as ever. There is a ring of the prophetic about it, as truly as was present in the Servile State. Even though, as he states, the Faith explains fully man's life and his normal relation to the world about him, nevertheless

it is hated and suffers a really astonishing ignorance of its character and habits in the minds of the onlookers. On this account I suggest that conflict between the Catholic Church and the other forces of the modern world is imminent. Whether we have yet heard the first clash or no is debatable. Whether a recognized and violent battle will be waged a short time hence or not until after a lifetime or more no one can tell. But it is coming. 9

8. Nolan, Joseph T., "Thunder of the Faith" in the Catholic Digest, December 1941.

9. Belloc, Hilaire, World Conflict, London, Catholic Truth Society, Do. 268 August 1951, 6 page pamphlet, page 7.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

14.

In 1906, Belloc's entry into Parliament was like "opening the back door to a hurricane". The tide of Imperialism had passed, but the four years he spent as a member, only made him believe that there was no purity in political life on either side. He was particularly angered by the more corrupt practices of the English Parliament, and said so loudly and stormily. At this time approximately began his sincere friendship with G.K. Chesterton, whom he had already known for a number of years. His first speech in Parliament established him as a brilliant orator, but his success as a parliamentarian was ephemeral and he retired from its ranks. Then he wrote in company with Cecil Chesterton, brother of G.K., The Party System, a scathing indictment of the parliamentary way, the momentum of which sent Cecil unjustly to jail for libel. This caused the pugnacious Belloc to express his views in the moving Servile State and the Restoration of Property. Herein he expounds the following profound theses on the evils of state capitalism:

The control by a monied few of the vast means of production has left the masses dependent and deprived of economic freedom. By this deficiency they lack freedom of the will; by this they are not fully men. An alternate choice remains: either total state control which is Communism, or the return of property to individual owners, a process for which Belloc coins the word "distributism". 10

10. Nolan, Joseph T., "Thunder of the Faith", in the Catholic Digest, December 1941, p. 16-17.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

15.

To his mind Capitalism and Collectivism are different aspects of the same evil and both create a servile state. The man who has no property is at the mercy of both and must take his orders from either industrialist bosses or office officials. He could, in theory, work or not as he chooses. But in practice

the economic fact did not bear out the political theory. The capitalist could work or not as he chose. The labourer could work - or starve. 11

The article goes on to show that Belloc's theories in 1912 England were considered as heresies - such opinions were fantastic. In America the book was not even published and was looked upon with extreme disfavour. But in 1946, Belloc's heresy had become one of the political truths of the time. The Socialism scare was on! The eyes of all America were trying to focus themselves upon a solution to their problem. And in an attempt - late indeed - to answer the clarion call, one publisher in the United States printed The Servile State. In this company's advertisement, it was stated very forcibly that it was " a service at this time to present the first American edition of The Servile State. 12 In the review of the book appeared the following:

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11. Belloc, Hilaire, "The Servile State" reviewed in The Saturday Review, October 19, 1946, p. 8.

12. Belloc, Hilaire, The Servile State, New York, Holt and Co., 1946, advertised, Saturday Review, October 19, 1946.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

16.

Belloc erred in some respects. He thought for example, that collectivism would never come because it could only come through confiscation - and confiscation was repugnant to mankind's deep-rooted sense of personal property. Russia proved him wrong. In its broad sweep, however, his thesis has been justified by the broad sweep of history (with some little help from men like Lenin and Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. For good or ill - and Belloc was the first to acknowledge the good - the servile state is already with us. 13

During the industrialization of England in the 19th century, new wealth piled up in the hands of the unworthy, as it had after the Reformation when the governing tyranny of wealth came to Europe. Regarding property and wealth Belloc's theories were always a matter of J'accuse...

I accuse the new rich always; I accuse Big Business for controlling Parliament and making the state servile; I accuse the imperialists; I accuse the English Universities for teaching anti-Catholic history. The Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith. I accuse H.G.Wells for his History of the World, a work which sets natural selection against the divine creative will, and denies the Fall. I accuse the banks for subservience to Wall Street after the 1st World War, for letting Germany rearm, for abandoning France..... 14

His novels and essays are used as media for the propagation of his ideas on Victorianism, the banks, mechanical science, the university dons and so on. The Belloc novels have

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13. Belloc, Hilaire, "The Servile State" reviewed in The Saturday Review, October 19, 1946, p. 8.

14. "Hilaire Belloc at 80", condensed from Picture Post, Hulton Press, Eng., in the Catholic Digest, August 1952, p. 8.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

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for background for the most part the England of his time of writing. Sometimes his mood becomes so extravagant that he cares little about the story, and events become as screens on which are focused the amused observations of Belloc himself. For example, in The Green Overcoat, the fact that Professor Higginson has discovered "life after death" (which forms part of the story), is of lesser importance than the fact that the reader is introduced to the fact that the people of that time were so gullible that they readily accepted any experience as long as it was unorthodox, sensational and occult. It is interesting to note here that G.B. Shaw who disagreed with Belloc on nearly everything voices the same opinion in one of his prefaces.

Our credulity, the enormous, is not boundless, and our stock of it is quite used up by our mediums, clairvoyants, hand readers, state writers, Christian Scientists, psychoanalysts, electronic vibration diviners, therapists...astrologers...astronomers...physicists...and a host of other marvel mongers whose credulity would have dissolved the Middle Ages in a roar of skeptical merriment...Modern science has convinced us that nothing that is obvious is true, and that everything that is magical, improbable, extraordinary, gigantic, microscopic, heartless, or outrageous is scientific. 15

Professor Higginson is a Bellocian puppet whose character could be the portrayal of any don. With all his

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15. Shaw, George Bernard, Saint Joan, quotation from the preface of the play.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

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learning he cannot retrieve the overcoat without resorting to "bold, bad, reckless crime". And the crime? Borrowing the coat! And when the Professor finally makes his great decision, Belloc shows that his plausible arguments were the basis of his fall.

Alas! These plausible arguments proceeded, had the Professor but known it, from the Enemy of Souls! He, the fallen archangel foresaw that coming ruin to which his lanky and introspective victim was unhappily blind. Dons are cheap meat for Devils! 16

The amnesia-affected Mr. Petre, in the novel of the same name, gives us a clue to the lack in the English "somebody" which in reality makes him "nobody". Mr. Petre is able to fool the whole world - except himself. The trainman thinks he is of the upper class; the hotel staff mistake him for the wealthiest of their clientèle - and he gets away with it; the bank clerk, "the humble associate of international finance", who thinks a cheque of seventy thousand pounds insignificant, lets him forge his way into the bank; and Marjorie Kyle "whose name was always in the papers", entertains him royally. Belloc gets at the newspapers too in the account of the dismissal of poor Battersby, the reporter, by the newspaper Duke who is a fantastic and fascinating tyrant.

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16. Braybrooke, Patrick, Some Catholic Novelists, Their Art and their Outlook, London, Burns Oates and Washbourne, Limited, 1937, p. 37-71.

The Emerald attacks Scotland Yard and journalism. A real journalist like McTaggart feels alone and out of place in the company of Victoria Mosel who spends her life "doing weekends at house-parties". A newspaper proprietor would have been happy there - but then, of course, he is not a journalist. Mr. Collop, the detective, is much overdrawn. He tears up, he tears down - nothing is sacred as long as the crime is not cleared up. He has no manners and at his hands even the Home Secretary, Mr. De Bohun, is but dirt.

There could be no better way of summarizing what Belloc stood for than to quote a passage from Wilhelmsen:

He was neither a Frenchman nor an Englishman; he was both of them, and he was more than either of them. In his essays Belloc is a South English peasant and a channel sailor. In his political sympathies he is an English Monarchist and a French Republican. In the soldierly dimension of himself he is thoroughly Gallic. In his all-over vision he belongs to the old Roman Empire and to Christendom. He combines within his personality a complexity of cultural and spiritual strains which are never bastardized in any specious internationalism, but which retain their individualities by being welded into an analagous unity by his Catholicism. His was a precarious but happy balance that included the main lines of his blood past and his spiritual ancestors. 17

This chapter has touched upon most of the principal themes and theses developed by Belloc in his prose. Knowing

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17. Wilhelmsen, Frederick, No Alienated Man, London, Sheed and Ward, 1954, p. 41-2.

## BELLOC'S THOUGHT

20.

now where he stands we may proceed, with a clearer conception of what to look for, to an analysis of his verse. In his trivial rhymes and in his serious poetry these same themes and theses reappear as a thread running through the sonnets, songs, ballades, epigrams, satires and child verse. The following chapters will attempt to point out the presence of these thoughts and analyze the style in which they are presented.

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE SONNETS

Belloc handles the sonnet form with skill, uniting in many cases the characteristics of the Petrarchan or Italian form with the Shakespearean or English. In the latest collection of Belloc's poetry,<sup>1</sup> there are forty-six sonnets, of which the first twenty appeared in the 1896 edition. Only twelve form a sonnet sequence - "The Sonnets of the Twelve Months". The remainder are individual pieces, bound together by no thread and written when time and occasion permitted. They are the most carefully "worked" of all his poetry and of them he may have been thinking when he told his friend that he was unable to conjure up verse ad lib. Glancing at their form we find that they have one characteristic in common, the octave-sestet division. The reader would expect to find this as Belloc has criticized Milton adversely on this score, saying that he had no clear idea of the break that should exist between octave and sestet, a break as between statement and comment, question and reply.<sup>2</sup> His rhyme scheme was unpredictable. Only very few are the perfect Italian form, some

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1. Roughead, W.N., editor, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch Press, MCMLIV, No. 1387, 296 p.

2. Belloc, Hilaire, Milton, London, Cassell and Co., April, 1935, p.

## THE SONNETS

22.

dozen make an attempt to be, three are very irregular and the remainder conclude with the rhymed couplet making them combinations of the two types.

Although he does not always follow the accepted rules, Belloc has not thrown his sonnets together in any haphazard way. There is evidence of the craftsman in both composition and word-choice. As one critic puts it: "They (the sonnets) are Parnassian in their workmanship." <sup>3</sup> Notice that he stops at workmanship, for although Belloc was interested in "le travail et la perfection de la forme" he had no preoccupation for "l'art pour l'art" which was one of the ideals of the Parnasse. Calvet speaks of Hérédia as a poet "(qui) prépare un sonnet comme une thèse de doctorat." <sup>4</sup> Belloc recognizes this and extols him for it. Not only was Hérédia a writer but a critic. In an essay on the appreciation he had for his work, Belloc had this to say:

The same deep security of literary judgment which had permitted him to chastise and to perfect his impeccable sonnets into their final form, permitted him to hold up before his eyes, grasp and judge the work of every other man. <sup>5</sup>

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3. Roughead, W.N., "Hilaire Belloc's Thought and Writings" in the Times Literary Supplement, London, No. 2729, May 21, 1954.

4. Calvet, J., Manuel Illustré d'Histoire de la Littérature Française, Paris, DeGigord, edit., Rue Cassette, 1947, p. 718.

5. Belloc, Hilaire, Selected Essays of Hilaire Belloc, Introduction by J.B. Morton, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1950, p. 110.

## THE SONNETS

23.

That Belloc made a rather detailed study of the sonnet form, and indeed that he was partial to it, is evidenced by the fact that in his literary criticism he has mentioned it particularly. In his long essay on Milton, where he extols this poet to a great degree, he has this to say of the sonnet:

The Sonnet is not a cry, nor the voice of an emotion; it is a thing made, and made slowly, an exercise in verse by man, creator of his own world. <sup>6</sup>

As an example of perfection in this genre he gives Milton's "Massacre of the Waldenses" which he says is

complete in its noise and its meaning from its surface to its depths, in its under and in its over tones. <sup>7</sup>

In Belloc's work "Avril", he appraises the works of the poets of the Pléiade and devotes one section to the "Sonnets for Helene". He runs briefly through the circumstances for writing with which we are not interested here, and then goes on to describe their style and their worth. What he admires in them is the perfection of their sound, their completion of harmony, the vivid interest of emotion and the fact that one or more of them can be sung. (This latter characteristic is discussed at length in the chapter on the songs.) Present also is a simplicity of form, when Ronsard was under the clear influence of some sharp passion or gaiety. As an example he

6. Belloc, Hilaire, Milton, London, Cassell, April 1935, p.  
7. ibid. p.

## THE SONNETS

24.

gives the following lines:

À fin qu'à tout jamais de siècle en siècle vive  
La parfaite amitié que Ronsard la portait.<sup>8</sup>

After a discussion of the form used and the forms approved by Belloc, we might altogether too hastily conclude that we are approaching the study of a classicist - in the midst of a post-romantic, Victorian, materialistic England. But now we are reminded of the second half of Roughead's remark on Belloc's sonnets,

.....the feeling is there as surely as in  
an Attic frieze.<sup>9</sup>

And thus it is. No longer do we see the belligerent Belloc fighting for his Faith and his tradition, but the reverent Belloc in love with his God and his country.

The Petrarchan sonnets show great similarity to the classical form both in structure and thought.

Hoar Time about the House betakes him slow  
Seeking an entry for his weariness.  
And in the dreadful company distress  
And the sad night with silent footsteps go.  
On my poor fire the brands are scarce aglow  
And in the woods without what memories press  
Where, waning in the trees from less to less  
Mysterious hangs the horned moon and low.

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8. Belloc, Hilaire, An Anthology of his Prose and Verse ed. W.N. Roughead, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, Soho Square, 1951, page 54.

9. Roughead, W.N., "Hilaire Belloc's Thought and Writings", in the Times Literary Supplement, London, No. 2729, May 21, 1954, page 1.

## THE SONNETS

25.

For now December, full of aged care  
 Comes in upon the year and weakly grieves;  
 Mumbling his lost desires and his despair  
 And with mad trembling hand still interweaves  
 The dank sear flower-stalks tangled in his hair,  
 While round about him whirl the rotten leaves.<sup>10</sup>

This sonnet in honour of December is the concluding sonnet in the sequence for the twelve months. After a first reading we might interpret this poem as referring to the end of the year. Time, usually represented as an old man, bent and carrying a scythe, is the symbol of the old year. He is begging for a place to rest now that he knows his days are numbered. He is distressed and weary because with the approach of December he realizes that death is at hand. Frantically he makes one last effort to restore some vestige of lost youth by clutching tremblingly the dead flower stalks as if hoping to weave garlands of spring beauty.

On a higher level - the level which gives that timelessness and universality so typical of Belloc - we can think of the poem as being symbolic of Everyman's life. On this gloomy snowless December night, he stands at the end of another year. Time has caught up with him once more and with slow but steady step stalks in and demands that another year be filed away in the cabinets of the past. As December closes in on him and he audits the books for another year, all he has to show are a host of the memories of what might have been

10. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Rougehead, 1954, page 8.

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26.

and hope that has given way to despair.

The sonnet gives us a disheartening picture, but not one that is unfamiliar. Actually the scene that he is describing is a rather universal one - that of making a general check-up at the end of the year. And when the results of that account have been tabulated they are not ordinarily too flattering to the ego. And so as the years go by we feel like December "full of aged care", and we are inclined to grumble over our "lost desires" and "our despair". But in spite of trials, hope springs eternal and again, like December, we seize the dying embers of our plans and in one last tremendous effort stir the fire which will make them live.

The descriptive words are deliberately chosen to evoke the impression of the transience of life. Time is "hoary" and "slow". His footsteps are "silent". December is "full of aged care" and the moon is mysterious and "horned". The flowers after only one season are already "dank and sear". All these, and then a seeming grand finale to the tragic passing of the year, "while round about him whirl the rotten leaves." In that one word "rotten" seems to be concentrated all the pent-up feelings of the poet's plight.

In an entirely different vein is the sonnet for May. It is the month of Mary when the Queen of the Angels brings back to a world wearied by the darkness of winter, a new hope for the fruition of all our desires.

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27.

This is the laughing-eyed amongst them all:  
 My lady's month. A season of young things.  
 She rules with harmony, and brings  
 The year's first green upon the beeches tall.  
 How often, where long creepers wind and fall  
 Through the deep woods in noonday wanderings,  
 I've heard the month, when she to echo sings,  
 I've heard the month make merry madrigal.

How often, bosomed in the breathing strong  
 Of mosses and young flowerets, have I lain  
 And watched the clouds, and caught the sheltered song-  
 Which it were more than life to hear again -  
 Of those small birds that pipe it all day long  
 Not far from Marly by the memoried Seine. <sup>11</sup>

Here Belloc pictures May as a queen, who from her throne causes the first leaves to burst forth from their winter buds. Her rule is one of love and harmony. She is laughing-eyed and merry as she makes her royal visit through her realm singing as she goes. To Belloc, that song as sung by Our Lady in the month of May is as real to him as any part of him. And this note which he strikes here will be repeated again and again throughout the course of his writings for the rest of his life.

In the sestet he presents another of his loves - his France. His experience of walking through the woods along the Seine in spring is one that has been part of him all his life, since those precious moments when as a little child his mother would take him and his sister through the shady glens and forests while telling them stories of the surrounding

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11. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, edited by W.N. Roughead, 1954, page 8.

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countryside or of her beloved England. The picture he gives here suits very well his experience of returning to those self-same places after he has become a youth. When he says that the "sheltered song" is one "which it were more than life to hear again", he is giving us a true account of his feelings as he lived once more the days which were now to him but a memory. But that memory lives on in every recurring May and whenever he breathes in the odour of spring mosses and young flowerets, he can hear amongst the clouds "the small birds that pipe it all day long not far from Marly and the memoried Seine."

It is interesting to contrast the vocabulary in the two sonnets discussed and discover one to be the direct antithesis of the other. The scene in the first takes place in the "sad night" with only the light from a "poor fire" to give warmth. The second is at noonday with the sun high in the heavens to give unsurpassable brightness to the universe. The "dank sear flower stalks" and the "rotten leaves" have given place to "the year's first green upon the beeches tall", "the long creepers" and the "mosses and young flowerets". December the hero of the first is hoary, slow, weary and silent - wielding his sceptre with trembling hand; May is laughing-eyed, young and beautiful and "rules the light with harmony." December mumbles "his lost desires and his despair", while May makes "merry madrigal" which will be echoed and re-echoed

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29.

through the woods. The mood of the poet has changed completely with the coming of spring. In December he is completely frustrated and despairs of seeing the fruition of any of his desires. Even the memories of his past "press" upon him. In May he sees growth - not only of the things of nature round about him, but in the fulfillment of his fondest hopes. Memories now, are welcome and when he hears the song of the birds, he describes it as one "which it were more than life to hear again."

Belloc the soldier appears in a number of the sonnets in this sequence and here so early in his career we see his love of history and historical references. July to him means but one thing - the battle for Jerusalem when the Christians of the western world laid siege to an issue that was to make or break Christendom. To him the battle was very real and the scene of it is laid in the sestet. It is 1096 and the Christian armies are assembled at Constantinople. The Normans are led by Boemund, son of Robert Guiscard, and he is the first to scale the wall. Godfrey of Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine, commands the Lotharingians from the Rhineland and Count Raymond of Toulouse heads the Provençals from Southern France. Together they "stormed" Jerusalem and three years later they came "riding back from the Crusade" filling the streets with "clamorous cavalcade". And as we would expect in a Bellocian description of warriors, they were "singin a great song of the eastern

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wars."

August too, is the "soldier month, the bulwark of the year". He is the Paladin - the heroic champion of his Imperial Majesty the Sun. August is the crown of all the seasons "come at last", and that crown evokes at once in the mind of Belloc, Charlemagne the Great "with his wide host came conquering home." September recounts the battle of Sedan, when a "brumal army" ordered by some "pale general" charged into battle.

November is compared to the "historied Emperor"

Who from his refuge high has heard the roar  
Of squadrons in pursuit, and now, too late,  
Stirrups the storm and calls the winds to war,  
And arms the garrison of his last heirlooms,  
And shakes the sky to its extremest shore  
With battle against irrevocable doom. 12

There is a delightful thread of continuity running through the sonnet sequence and the seasons of rest, awakening, blossoming and death might well be likened to the metamorphosis of a flowering plant. In January all is as if dead: "It freezes." Death is "master of our moment". The wind is "viewless" and the "graven twigs are still." Over all is a "steadfast dark that waits not for a sun. But February is "nearing the hilltops" and just as added warmth brings an awakening to a seed dormant, it would seem, unto death, so life begins to course through the veins of all nature and there is a trembling "through the general earth, and over you, a quickening and a

12. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, 1954, p. 8.

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birth." The winter moon drives her "quiet car" which does not fully awaken the night but life is there and "silence is dead, my Dawn; the morning's here."

Now the "north-east wind has come from Norrøway" and amidst the noise of waves crashing under the impetus of this warrior, he churns the waters and casts "his snow cloud's terrible eclipse." March has gone to war but only to break the cotyledon cover of dormant nature - emerging in April as "little heads of green" and "hidden flowers"; "the first hedgethorns and white windflowers." There are treacherous clouds in the sky but the grace, the warmth and the fragility which is the April child is productive of the "laughing-eyed amongst them all" - May, "the season of young things", the "very promise of the morning" of June.

July and August are the fullness of the metamorphosis - the perfect blossom of the plant; the young adult at the zenith of his power. Soldier months are these - conquerors triumphant with "heaven-high spear and helmeted of grand Etruscan gold." But power, like the full bloom of the rose, is passing and though September leads an army, he is but a "pale general" whose troops are scarred and faded. Nature too, is pursued by mists and frosts and the glorious army of green and iridescent shades must "burn, burn against the sunset". Even their historied Emperor, November, is "driven and hurled from

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32.

his strong citadel" and await "hoar Time" and Death. But from the "dank sear flower-stalks" and "rotten leaves" where all seems lost, comes December's hope, for hidden deep in their bosom lie the embryonic plants of another cycle.

To gain this effect Belloc has used a number of poetic devices chief of which is onomatopoeia. We not only can hear noise but we can even hear the heart-beat of silence. The waters are not merely still but "Every friendly stream is fast. It freezes." Each "f" and "s" sound there is indicative of the crack of frost that one hears only when there is perfect stillness. When the March wind blows it "suddenly struck the ship" and on reaching the Ocean it is "bellowing battle songs". The King comes from the Crusade with "clamorous cavalcade" while the October winds are tempestuous and their "moaning gusts make desolate all the place." November "shakes the sky" and "battles against irrevocable doom" but old December can manage only a limp and "with silent footsteps go."

Alliteration is used aptly and with ease, sometimes helping to paint a colour, occasionally adding fire to a sound picture, more often just adding to a general idea. We have examples of this in "soundless sky"; "the white waves' tips"; "bellowing battle songs"; "still serene desire"; "the month make merry madrigal"; "bramble beard" and "foot to foot with fate."

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33.

Personification is used throughout the sequence and the months come to life in the form of a man or woman, young or old, depending upon the season or the time of year.

January is Death who "with evil finger to his lip, leers in at human windows turning spy." February is the winter moon who "has such a quiet car that all the winter nights are dumb with rest." March is the north-east wind; May, the laughing-eyed amongst them all; July, August and September are the soldier months but in varying degrees of might - the first a King, the second an Emperor but the third a pale general. November is the defeated ruler, while December is the epitome of old age - old Father Time whose hour-glass has almost run its course.

The descriptive passages are excellent and are never used unless necessary to fill up what is lacking. This economy of words, of course, is characteristic of the poet's style. We have chill "that shall benumb the voiceful earth at last"; We see "drowsy stars", "droughty dusts", "the year's first green upon the beeches tall", "the little eastern clouds are dapple grey", "the crimson ships, the crimson sails and diamonded dark oars" and Charlemagne's "bramble beard flaked red with foam of bivouac wine-cups on the Lombard plain." We feel the "tired limbs I'll stretch" and rejoice while "singing old songs and drinking wine together."

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34.

"The Check" is one of the most finely balanced of Belloc's sonnets.

Shall any man for whose strong love another  
 Has thrown away his wealth and name in one,  
 Shall he turn mocker of a more than brother  
 To slight his need when his adventure's done?  
 Or shall a breedless boy whose mother won him  
 In great men's great concerns his little place  
 Turn, when his farthing honours come upon him,  
 To mock her yeoman's air and conscious grace?

Then mock me as you do my narrow scope,  
 For you it was put out this light of mine:  
 Wrongfully wrecked my new adventured hope,  
 Wasted my wordy wealth, spilt my rich wine,  
 Made my square ship within a league of shore  
 Alas! to be entombed in seas and seen no more.<sup>13</sup>

The vantage of the questioner is that of a writer who has been pained by the sting of ingratitude - ingratitude so potent that it has caused the light of inspiration to be snuffed out, wasted and buried in the sea of oblivion. The hurt that he suffered in consequence was so intense that in the octave he has compared it to two almost unnatural situations: first, the man who, being befriended by his "more than brother" turns his back on him as soon as he is no longer in need of his services; and second, to the son who sneers at his mother's bearing after she has sacrificed her all to get him a place in society. By the manner of the questioning and the matter of the questions the reader is convinced that such situations are impossible. Then the poet smashes the fragile crystal of self-pride. Those very readers who believe humanity too human for such acts are the very ones who are addressed in the sestet. Turning to

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them he says, "Then mock me.....for you it was put out this light of mine." You have brought about this unhappiness. You, the publisher or the critic, are like the son and friend of whom I speak. In the fullness of my life I have completed this inspired work, "this light of mine", and now it has been wrecked, wasted and spilt because you have neither the capacity nor the background to appreciate it.

The force of the sestet would not be so great if the poet had not built up to it in several ways. There is the effect of contrasts - the utter selflessness of the mother set against the selfish snobbery of the son; the total renunciation of the friend as compared with the inflated ego of the man whom he befriended. The rhythm lends drive to the ideas. Every other line in the octave has eleven syllables which causes it to be lighter and move more rapidly towards the climax. In the sestet the speed slows up to ten beats with many long "o's" and "e's" giving a more thoughtful, more ponderous and more powerful effect. The last line is particularly good as it contains a long pause after "Alas!" which word is part of a twelve syllable line. The long vowel sounds emphasize more completely the fact that the poet's creation has been sunk into a fathomless depth forever.

Here we see a little of the poet as a dramatic orator. There is the effective parallel structure of the two rhetorical questions. The repetition of the word "mock" in both

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quatrains and again in the sestet, gives unity and adds to the force of the thought. A reading aloud of the poem gives the finest interpretation of the integration of sound with thought.

The images are clearly drawn by the use of cleverly chosen words. A friend becomes "a more than brother"; advancement is called "farthing honours"; and his inspiration is "this light of mine", new adventured hope" and "my rich wine". Two lines are excellent examples of alliteration, to which effect are added consonants which staccato his words of scorn:

Wrongfully wrecked my new adventured hope,  
Wasted my wordy wealth, spilt my rich wine.

The poem is filled with intense feeling. We might easily believe that it was written after some of Belloc's first verse was refused by the publishers - especially since he has used "the heedless boy" metaphor in the second quatrain. His love, respect and appreciation for his own mother were so great that he could think of no more caustic comparison than the opposite vice to lay upon his enemies of the literary world. But the feeling, so typical of the Romanticist, does not take precedence over the classical form. The studied use of words, the rhyme scheme, the metre and the form are the boundaries inside which the poet remains in his "tour d'ivoire".

In the sonnets we have the three favorite themes of Belloc: his joyous faith in God and man; his profound love of the earth, above all, the English earth; and a satirization

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of the enemies of these things. <sup>14</sup> The first of these, appears more often than the others. Belloc has no doubt ever, that God will not right the wrongs of the world. That there are wrongs, he admits, but always they are permitted for a purpose. Then, the cause being removed God makes up what has been lacking. Belloc brings this idea out in the opening quatrain of his sonnet written to "The Poor of London" during a great dock strike in 1889.

Almighty God, whose justice like a sun  
Shall coruscate along the floors of Heaven,  
Raising what's low, perfecting what's undone,  
Breaking the proud and making odd things even. <sup>15</sup>

In the "Despair" sonnet we that triumphant note so characteristic of Belloc when he describes his God and Lord:

You (Despair) were not found on Olivet, dull beast,  
Nor in Thebaid, when the night's agonies  
Dissolved to glory on the effulgent east  
And Jesus Christ was in the morning skies. <sup>16</sup>

That Belloc had great faith in the life of the soul after death is quite evident. This is God's great promise to all mankind. Those who die, he says, will not exist merely as ghosts to receive the tears and the adulation of friends and acquaintances but will truly live forever earning the "great wages"

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<sup>14</sup>. "Hilaire Belloc, His Spirit and His Work" - # 5  
The Poet, by Robert Hamilton, in the Irish Ecclesiastical  
Record, Vol. LXVI: 1945, p. 51-7.

<sup>15</sup>. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, ed. W.N. Roughead,  
1954, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>. *ibid.* p. 20.

## THE SONNETS

38.

of eternity.

But on that brink of Heaven where lingering stand  
 The still-remembrant spirits hearkening down,  
 Go, tower among them all, to hear the land,  
 To hear the land alive with your renown.  
 Nor strength, nor peace, nor laughter could I give  
 But this great wages: after death, to live. 17

It could be argued that in this sonnet Belloc refers only to the reputation of the poet which will remain alive after his death, for he has commanded the writer "to hear the land alive with your renown" while he stands on the brink of Heaven. In such a case he would be addressing one of the giants in the literary world, for none of the others would live always in memory. On the other hand he is making a promise that this latest spirit is going to "tower" among the "still-remembrant" dead as a reward for his work on earth. Even though his household will be left desolate and his "admirable Ghost" will be revered by man, more than that he will receive his "great wages" - life after death, which can only mean eternal life and eternal happiness in Heaven.

Belloc's love of the earth grew as he grew. From his idyllic country home in La Celle, near Paris, he came to live at the age of eight in equally charming country surroundings at Slindon, Sussex and from that time on the Sussex Downs came to be "knit in with our flesh" as he says in The Four Men. In a number of the sonnets we find this to be one of his

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17. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, p. 13.

## THE SONNETS

39.

avored lyrical themes. This is the case in one of the most oft-quoted.

Lift up your hearts in Gumber, laugh the weald  
 And you my mother the Valley of Arun sing.  
 Here I am homeward from my wandering,  
 Here am I homeward and my heart is healed.  
 You my companions whom the World has tired  
 Come out to greet me. I have found a face  
 More beautiful than Gardens; more desired  
 Than boys in exile love their native place.

Lift up your hearts in Gumber, laugh the weald  
 And you most ancient Valley of Arun sing.  
 Here am I homeward from my wandering,  
 Here am I homeward and my heart is healed.  
 If I was thirsty, I have heard a spring,  
 If I was dusty, I have found a field. 18

No doubt the young Belloc has just returned from one of his walking tours in France. While roaming hither and yon he has been happy at seeing new sights, new faces, but interiorly his heart has been filled with nostalgic longing, a longing that has become an intense thirst. Now that he is home that thirst is slaked as at a spring. Typical of his perennial boyish exuberance he greets his South Country with a song. The first four lines are repeated almost identically from octave to sestet giving the poem a rollicking air and a singing note which emphasizes the poet's delight at returning. The opening line "Lift up your hearts" seems almost to expect the answer "We have lifted them up unto the Lord." Here we see Belloc's intimacy with the Mass and his ability to integrate his per-

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18. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, 1954, p. 13.

## THE SONNETS

40.

sonal experience with ease.

In this sonnet there occurs another of Belloc's word techniques - the use of place-names for effect. In his essay on Milton, he has praised the use of such words, referring to them as "that symbol the place-name." He goes on to say that these names are sonorous to the ear and give the reader something on which to put his finger. Whether the place is known or not makes little difference. The effect is still there. In this poem he asks the Gumber, the Weald and the Valley of the Arun to rejoice with him because, like the prodigal son, he has returned home. He so identifies himself with these places that they almost become real persons. While he is speaking to them the reader is forming a picture of the Sussex wolds, the peaceful valley of the Arun and the rippling river racing over the rocks. The valley is his mother; these surroundings his companions. All are out to greet him who has been tired to exhaustion by society, worldly interests and pleasures. These delights of nature are more beautiful to his eyes and more satisfying to his heart than Gardens - by which it is possible he means such man-made beauty as the Gardens of Versailles. This Sussex countryside epitomizes all that is wonderful, all that is fine - in short, home.

If I was thirsty, I have found a spring.  
If I was dusty, I have found a field.

## THE SONNETS

41.

The couplets with which the sonnets are ended form a splendid completion. As one writer has put it, "he has the secret of the resolving chord."<sup>19</sup> The comparison here is as clever as the couplets themselves. The sonnet is compared to a musical composition, which, embellished by changing harmonies from minor to major to dominant and so on, sweeps on to a grand finale on the tonic chord. This completes the composition and gives the necessary finality to the piece. Belloc's couplets could be described in much the same way and are to his sonnets what the resolving chord is to music. Some of the better examples follow:

We sweat to learn our book: for all our pains  
We pass. The chucker-out alone remains.<sup>20</sup>

But in my garden all the trees have shed  
Their legacies of the light and all the flowers are dead.<sup>21</sup>

But all that's over. Here's the world again  
Bring me the blotter. Fill the fountain-pen.<sup>22</sup>

Some of his "resolving chords" are one-line gems:

Hector: the horseman: in the Scaean gate.<sup>23</sup>

But don't believe in Pheme; she's a fraud.<sup>24</sup>

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19. Roughead, W.N., "The European Mind", in the Times Literary Supplement, No. 2729, May 21, 1954, p.2, col. 4.

20. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, ed. W.N.Roughead, "The World's a Stage", # 2, p. 164.

21. ibid. "November", p. 8.

22. ibid. p. 165

23. ibid. p. 20

24. ibid. p. 23.

## THE SONNETS

42.

Summing up the merits of the sonnets - the perfection of their form, their word pictures, the similes and metaphors, the alliterations, contrasts and splendidly clever couplets - it can be seen that Belloc has applied to his own poetry what he said of "verse" in general in one of his well-known essays:

All that can best be expressed in words should be expressed in verse, but verse is a slow thing to create; nay it is not really created; it is a secretion of the mind; it is a pearl that gathers round some irritant and slowly expresses the very essence of beauty and desire that has lain long potential and unexpressed, in the mind of the man who creates it.<sup>25</sup>

Though his sonnets are gems of perfection of form, none of them are beyond the comprehension of the average reader. His expression is traditional and therefore he is sure of communication with his audience. He is not a symbolist and does not have to append a glossary for the understanding of his poetry. Very few of the sonnets have classical or historical references and those which have, lend themselves easily to interpretation without the constant use of a classical dictionary. When the poetic off-spring of the modern fads of trick-typing, private interpretation, sound medleys and even symbolic illustrations have faded away into oblivion, Belloc's sonnets will still retain the freshness of sincere and natural expression.

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25. Belloc, Hilaire, "Essay on an Unknown Country".

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

Write a good song and the tune leaps up to meet it out of nothingness. It clothes itself with tune, and once so clothed it continues through generations, eternally young, always smiling, and always ready with strong hands for mankind. On this account every man who has written a song can be certain that he has done good; any man who has continually sung them can be certain that he has lived and has communicated life to others. It is the best of all trades to make songs, and second best to sing them. <sup>1</sup>

Read this paragraph and you have a good example of the theory which has produced the wealth of songs incarnate in Belloc. These are not the simpering, sentimental variety of words set to music typical of the twentieth century radio broadcaster; they are lyrics whose voice is raised in praise of all that the poet loves - the sea, his ship the Nona, the inns, the Child Jesus and Our Lady. The songster is the jovial, joyous, almost mysterious side of Belloc. As a child of four he wrote to his mother:

Chère maman - I am four years old. I've been given a drum, but I'm not allowed to beat it in the house, only in the garden or out on the road. <sup>2</sup>

and we know that this gift was the result of his childlike

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1. Belloc, Hilaire, On Everything, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1927, p. 6.

2. Lowndes, Marie-Belloc, I Too Have Lived In Arcadia

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

44.

joy in parades of soldiers thrilling his whole being with the rhythm of marching feet.

But little mention else is made of music in the four volumes of Marie Belloc-Lowndes' Autobiography. It would seem that the family was keenly interested in every other phase of the fine arts except music. Morton, who has the most personal biography of Belloc, states that

Apart from songs, Belloc had not much interest in music, and he could not stand piano-playing. He liked simple airs and uncomplicated melodies, voices not over-trained....It is odd that a man with such a gift for writing melodies for his own songs should not have been more interested in music. <sup>3</sup>

Singing was as much a part of Belloc as life itself. We are told that he had a high tenor voice and that he was able to use it with gusto to the end of his days. Those who walked with him, rode with him, sailed with him, understood that congeniality meant passing much of the time in song. He could compose a song quite readily for any occasion - words and music - and was annoyed if the tune was changed in any way. It is told of him that the first thing he would do on entering a house was to ask to telephone - he was meticulous in his practice of letting people know exactly when he would arrive at their home and where he was at present - and then

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3. Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, Hollis and Carter, London, 1955, p. 43.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

45.

burst into song. He was forever longing for companionship and he and his friends would go on long walking tours. Such a trip as this was the inspiration for the Four Men in which there is one section called "Drinking Songs". And while the four are on their way to Leonard's Lee, the Sailor breaks forth

so loud and joyful that in some more progressive place than the country he would most certainly be thrown into prison.<sup>4</sup>

The result of this enthusiastic burst of melody was the "Sussex Song".

On Sussex hills where I was bred,  
When lanes in autumn rains are red,  
When Arun tumbles in his bed,  
    And busy great gusts go by;  
When branch is bare in Burton Glen  
And Bury Hill is a-whitening then,  
I drink strong ale with gentlemen;  
    Which nobody can deny, deny,  
    Deny, deny, deny, deny,  
    Which nobody can deny.

In half-November off I go,  
To push my face against the snow,  
And watch the winds wherever they blow,  
    Because my heart is high:  
Till I settle me down in Steyning to sing  
Of the women I met in my wandering,  
And of all that I mean to do in the spring.  
    Which nobody can deny, deny,  
    Deny, deny, deny, deny,  
    Which nobody can deny.

Then times be rude and weather be rough,  
And ways be foul and fortune tough,

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<sup>4</sup>. Belloc, Hilaire, An Anthology of His Prose and Verse, selected by W.N. Roughead, "The Four Men, p. 89.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

46.

We are of the stout South Country stuff,  
 That never can have good ale enough,  
 And do this chorus cry!  
 From Crowboro' Top to Ditchling Down,  
 From Hurstpierpont to Arundel Town,  
 The girls are plump and the ale is brown:  
 Which nobody can deny, deny,  
 Deny, deny, deny, deny,  
 Which nobody can deny. 5

The theme is one of love for Sussex. It was in the South Country that he "was bred" and because he knows it so well, he is familiar with every nook and cranny. Only love observes little things in the beloved and here the singer detects the smallest details in the change of seasons, the tumbling of the Arun, the blowing of the winds, the whitening hill and the baring of the branches. Despite the fact that the autumn leaves are shed and the busy great gusts of wind herald the "half-November" with its sleet and snow, the singer is always happy and his "heart is high", for he knows that home to him will be a settling down, when he can sing and talk and warm the cockles of his heart with another of his loves "strong ale". When reading this one recalls the poem, the "South Country":

I will build a house with deep thatch  
 To shelter me from the cold,  
 And there shall the Sussex songs be sung  
 And the story of Sussex told. 6

Here again we have that pre-occupation of Belloc for his

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5. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, ed. W.N. Roughead, Nonesuch Press, 1954, p. 89.

6. *ibid.* p. 36.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

47.

future life. Then there seems always to be the fear that he will need someone or something "to shelter from the cold" his lonely self. Thus he speaks of pushing his face "against the cold" and the times being "rude" and the weather "rough". Realizing that these poems were all written around 1912, when a growing family was straining his financial means considerably, we can well understand that gnawing worry.

The rousing chorus brings to mind another of his drinking songs written of West Sussex:

With my here it goes, there it goes,  
All the fun's before us;  
The Tipple's aboard and the night is young,  
The door's ajar and the Barrel is sprung,  
I am singing the best song ever was sung  
And it has a rousing chorus. <sup>7</sup>

As the walk of the four men progresses, Myself remarks

It was certainly in the land beneath us, and  
along the Weald which we overlooked, that  
once many years ago, a young man must have  
written this song. <sup>8</sup>

and we might well recall here that the "First Drinking Song" is not the spontaneous burst of song that the Sailor would have us believe but a carefully thought-out verse composed by a young man "many years ago".

In this poem Belloc has made use of another of his poetic devices, the proper name. His use of it is not an

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7. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, p. 54.  
8. Hilaire Belloc: An Anthology, Roughead, p. 173.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

48.

indiscriminate one because each of the fourteen adds something to the picturesqueness of the scene. With Belloc the geography of a place had to be sure, It could not be any river, it was the Arun, and at once we get a picture of the valley and a very definite spot therein, indicated by Burton Glen and Bury Hill. By the mention of the four towns in the last stanza, Belloc accentuates the fun and laughter found throughout the whole of the South.

The rhythm of the song is noteworthy, for the metre is indicative of the step of marching feet. The four-foot, three-foot lines recall the six-eight measures of an Irish reel, with even the rest in the last measure taken care of by the short line of poetry. For the most part the iambic foot is used but very often an anapest is placed here and there to hasten the step but without a loss of rhythm. Examples of this are in such lines as

And busy great gusts go by.     and  
 And Bury Hill is a-whitening then,     and  
 And of all that I mean to do in the spring.

Belloc considers the song a comfort against every despair. In fact he goes so far as to say that a society without song is permanently imperilled and likely to perish from death by starvation. To sing is natural to man and from earliest times we have evidence of people lifting up their hearts in songs of praise, of joy, of sorrow or of lamentation.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

49.

So says he, sailors sing, soldiers sing, the common people sing, rowers sing. Great poets are chiefly singers and "their songs dignify them more than any other." 9

As a member of the first of these classes, Belloc was as the twentieth century would say "a natural". He loved the sea almost as if it were a person. At any time at all, in season, Belloc would call upon one or more of his friends to go for a sail - sometimes for just a day, often for several weeks at a time - thinking nothing of a trip across the channel or over the Irish Sea. And the favorite pastime of the crew was to sing vociferously as the ship rode the waves.

All his life Belloc loved the sea. He loved both the repose and the challenge. Many of his happiest days were spent sailing his own little boat and some of his finest writing relates his adventures at sea and the thoughts that came to him in storm and calm. There was recurrent in him a mood of rebellion against the cares of life and the incessant toil of writing to earn money. That theme was that of "Battersea Bridge". 10

Battersea Bridge is a delightful lyric called forth by the sight of the Nona at rest in Arundel Bay. As he gazes down upon the ship, a strong south-west wind recalls to his mind the woods and downs of his "south country". His Nona was

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9. Belloc, Hilaire, "On Song" in On Everything, Methuen and Co., p. 4.

10. Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, Hollis and Carter, London, p. 46.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

50.

synonymous with friends, love and laughter and in a burst of desire he decides to mount her.

My boat, that was the strongest friend to me.  
That brought my boyhood to its first encounter  
And taught me the wide sea. ll

And charging through the foam of the wind-raised waves, the towns with their treacherous streets will be left behind and together he and the Nona will search for something beyond the sea. But he stops short for he cannot quite fathom what and where it is,

My little Boat, we shall not make the haven -  
It is not of the world. ll

But this goal must be somewhere, for as a boy it had seemingly been so clear to him. Now it was wrapped in a sea of oblivion which was his youth. Now he is a man and still the sea compels him to push ever onward while a still stronger force is holding him back. What will be the haven,? Or will he only know it after death when in Heaven he will receive the reward merited by those who have done God's will? In the poem, the sea represents inspiration constantly pulling him forward to great poetry; the unnamed force is his duty to maintain his family. Always there is this conflict, and always duty wins the battle. In the last stanza of the poem, we realize what a sacrifice it was for him to give up his heart's desire.

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ll. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, "Stanzas Written on Battersea Bridge", Roughead, Nonesuch, p. 35-36.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

51.

England, to me that never have malinguered,  
 Nor spoken falsely, nor your flattery used,  
 Not even in my rightful garden lingered:-  
 What have you not refused? 12

Here, then, is the "snare that holds me and appals me." He has been caught in a net of circumstances and while his real self clamours for poetic expression his ensnared self grinds out saleable prose.

It is not surprising that on the Feast of Mount Carmel Our Lady should have taken to Herself one who had such a tender devotion to the Mother of God. This love for the Blessed Virgin and the Child Jesus is the theme for a number of Belloc's songs. "The Birds" is one of the most popular.

When Jesus Christ was four years old,  
 The angels brought Him toys of gold,  
 Which no man ever bought or sold.

And yet with these He would not play,  
 He made Him small fowl out of clay,  
 And blessed them till they flew away:  
 Tu creasti Domine.

Jesus Christ, Thou child so wise,  
 Bless mine hands and fill mine eyes,  
 And bring my soul to Paradise. 13

Here with the utmost simplicity Belloc has portrayed a tremendous theological truth. In just a few lines, and with childlike delicacy, Belloc has shown us the creative power of God - all-powerful and yet loving poverty: "and yet with these

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12. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, Nonesuch, p. 36.  
 13. ibid. p. 40-41.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

52.

He would not play." The poet's imaginative faculty coupled with his understanding of little ones picture the Christ Child as creating a few little birds for playthings rather than toys of gold. How like the presentation in the Temple when St. Joseph and Our Lady brought only the offering of the poor - two doves.

The line in Latin is used with splendid force: "Tu creasti Domine." - Thou hast created them, O Lord - a line filled with the perfect faith of the writer. And then we have the concluding prayer which would be the plea of child or adult alike:

Jesus Christ, Thou child so wise,  
Bless mine hands and fill mine eyes,  
And bring my soul to Paradise.

"Unless thou become as a little child" says Our Lord, and so the poet asks in a familiar and humble manner that his hands and his eyes will be a means of his sanctification so that one day his soul will be in Heaven for all eternity. Here is living devotion indeed to the Child Jesus.

The little poem "Courtesy" is another gem extolling the virtues of Our Lady.

Of courtesy, it is much less  
Than Courage of Heart or Holiness,  
Yet in my Walks it seems to me  
That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.

On Monks I did in Storrington fall,  
They took me straight into their Hall;  
I saw Three Pictures on the wall,  
And Courtesy was in them all.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

53.

The first the Annunciation;  
 The second the Visitation;  
 The third the Consolation,  
 Of God that was Our Lady's Son.

The first was of St. Gabriel;  
 On Wings a-flame from Heaven he fell;  
 And as he went upon one knee  
 He shone with Heavenly Courtesy.

Our Lady out of Nazareth rode -  
 It was Her month of heavy load;  
 Yet was Her face both great and kind,  
 For Courtesy was in Her mind.

The third it was our Little Lord,  
 Whom all the Kings in arms adored;  
 He was so small you could not see  
 His large intent of Courtesy.

Our Lord, that was Our Lady's Son,  
 Go bless you, People, one by one;  
 My rhyme is written, my work is done. 14

The story is simple. The poet visits some Monks in Storrington and with great courtesy they bring him in to visit their monastery. During the visit, he is shown three pictures, each one portraying to him an example of courtesy; first, of the Angel Gabriel sent by God to salute Mary as "Full of Grace" and to announce the conception of Our Lord in Her womb; second, of Our Lady on her visitation to her cousin Elizabeth during those long months preceding the birth of Jesus; and third, of the Baby Jesus Himself, who though so tiny breathed forth the essence of courtesy.

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14. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, "Courtesy", Roughead, None such, 1954, p. 40-41.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

54.

The poet reminds us that Courtesy is not a virtue which requires great bravery or great physical or mental effort. It is a virtue which we acquire through the Grace of God. Just as Courtesy increased in magnitude from that of the Monks, to the Angel Gabriel, to Our Blessed Mother and then to Our Lord, so it will be perfected in man as he increases in sanctifying Grace. The poem ends with the little prayer typical of Belloc:

Our Lord that was Our Lady's Son,  
Go bless you, People, one by one.

The metre in the third stanza is interesting and is used effectively. The poet, while still thinking on the courtesy of the Monks, is struck by the similarity of their action to what he sees in the three pictures on the wall. The long syllables and the change to spondaic feet followed by a semi-colon at the end of each line, indicates the care he took in looking at each picture. There was no doubt a short meditation at each one - perhaps the poet might even have written down a word or two in his notebook. At any rate, the long pause shows that his view was not a superficial one. And then of a sudden he realizes that he is in company and must hasten on. Notice the return at once to the original metre: "Of God that was Our Lady's Son." The same type of pause and long syllables are effective in the fifth stanza:

Our Lady out of Nazareth rode -  
It was Her month of heavy load;

## SONGS AND BALLADES

55.

In this poem Belloc has used a great number of capitalized words - some place-names, some personification. Courtesy, Walks and Monks portray volumes to us. Walks, indicate the poet's intercourse with people in general. Here he meets the men of the world all receiving, in varying degrees, the Grace of God and all in direct contrast with the Monks who represent those who have left the world for God alone. After analysing the virtue and then applying his findings to an analysis of the people whom he has met, he discovers that courtesy varies according to the amount of Christian virtue possessed by the individual. In fact he goes so far as to say that unless a person be in the state of Sanctifying Grace he will not possess Courtesy at all: "The Grace of God is in Courtesy."

It is amazing how many pictures are portrayed in such a simple poem but this shows another Bellocian characteristic. His condensation of thought is most effective. In just a few well-chosen words he permits our imagination to weave in the whole background. Let us recall the scenic pictures we have - the vast numbers of people whom he met on his walks through the country; the monastery at Storrington with its great hall echoing silence and meditation; the contemplation of the first three Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary with a host of storied memories; the arrival of the three Kings at the Stable of Bethlehem on the first Epiphany - and all called up by such short phrases as, "Yet in my Walks", "I saw three pictures",

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

56.

"On wings a-flame from Heaven he fell", and so on.

Comparable to this economy of words, and also securing a tremendous effect, is the last stanza of "The Leader":

Her face was like a king's command  
 When all the swords are drawn.  
 She stretched her arm and smiled at us,  
 Her head was higher than the hills.  
 She led us to the endless plains.  
 We lost her in the dawn. 13

There we have Belloc's picture of St. Joan as she gave the signal to the soldiers to follow her to battle. The simile in the first line gives a superb description of the Joan who has finally conquered the French leaders - the King included - and is now in a position to carry out the heavenly commands which she has received. Of the first two lines of this verse, Roughead has said that it is a "bugle-call" which only Belloc could have sounded." 14 Of the same poem this critic says that although Belloc is not an imitator, yet his poetry "occasionally, in its more romantic moods, had something in common with the earlier Yeats", 14 and he quotes the lovely quatrain:

She rose a steed of the sea-foam breed,  
 All faery was her blade,  
 And the armour on her tender limbs  
 Was of the moonshine made. 15

13. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, Nonesuch, 1954, p. 42.

14. Roughead, W.N., "Hilaire Belloc's Thought and Writing" in the Times Literary Supplement, May 21, 1954, p. 2.

15. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, p. 42.

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

57.

Where could we find more beautiful description? But it does not for a moment minimize her role as warrior. "The king's command" of her face has made too lasting an impression.

Belloc says that sailors sing almost continuously (witness his own parties aboard the *Nona!*) Their songs change with their mood or their work. They have songs for toil, songs for rowing; songs of tragedy, songs of laughter; some tinged with brutality, others nostalgic and gentle. His most famous sea-chaunty is the "Chaunty of the *Nona*", the words and music of which were published in 1928 as one of a series called the "Ariel Poems".

Like so many of Belloc's songs, we can only fully appreciate the rhythm when the poetry is read aloud. It takes only a moment to establish the metre and then we are away and over the waves. Those who are familiar with the poet's biography, are given a picture in the first line of a scene on the *Nona*. Belloc had his own sailing fraternity, as Speaight calls it - his son Peter, Dermot McCarthy, W.N. Roughead, James Hall, A.D. Peters, J.B. Morton and Lord Stanley of Alderley. At any moment of the night or day, some or all of these might be invited to bring around his boat to some port or other. And then once on board he would call out:

Come list all ye Gullies and Doxies so dear,  
You shall hearken to the tale of the Bold Marineer.

and the crew would be expected to burst forth on the chorus -

## THE SONGS AND BALLADES

58.

music ad lib, or properly composed by the "Marineer" himself.

As soon as he has the attention of the greenhorns as well as those who are experienced in the art of the sea-chanty he begins his tale. This fearless marineer boldly sets forth from Holyhead and after a swift sail down stream past numerous ports, skirts a difficult island and passes through a treacherously narrow inlet on out into the ocean. Just as the boat reaches the high sea, a storm comes up forcing the boat into Milford Haven where amidst fog, wind and rain they let anchor for the night. The morning rises still and calm but at the whistle of the Captain the north-west wind brought them sailing for the next twenty-four hours until they had reached Lundy Light. But still their troubles are not over and for twelve hours they battle the currents until finally, borne in on the tide, the ship lowers anchor, covers the hatches and comes to rest. They have reached Bideford - the port and the "end of the world". Once more we have this thought so persistent with Belloc - the idea of the end of his life and the end of his world.

There is excellent use of descriptive vocabulary in this poem. Belloc has drawn a clever and graphic picture of the old seaman who guides the ship. Actually he uses no adjectives except "bold marineer". However his actions speak for him and we see before us a man who took ship and "drove her so hard";

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who skirted the island of Skomer and "with the heart of a Lion he threaded Jack Sound"; then "clawed Milford Haven" and when he reached the Great White Horse Race, "tossed for twelve hours in that horrible place." Up until now he has been keyed up for any danger, any emergency; but the hours of trial are over and with a tired sigh of relief, interwoven with the thrill of a voyage accomplished, he slides his ship to rest where "the Long Bridge of Bideford is the end of the World."

"Ha'nacker Mill" is in an entirely different vein and brings to mind a statement of Belloc in his essay on song:

Song becomes like a sort of sacrament,  
outside time, not subject to decay. <sup>16</sup>

Belloc was loath to see the familiar landmarks of the English countryside disappearing. It seems that just previous to the writing of this poem Belloc and his wife had been on an extended stay in Europe and when they returned to Sussex they found that the mill near their home had been deserted and already was beginning to show signs of complete deterioration. With a heavy heart the poet sings:

Sally is gone that was so kindly  
Sally is gone from Ha'nacker Hill.  
And the Briar grows ever since then so blindly  
And ever since then the clapper is still,  
And the sweeps have fallen from Ha'nacker Mill.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Belloc, Hilaire, On Everything, from the essay "On Song", Methuen, p. 6.

17. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, Nonesuch, p. 64.

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And the poet sings in minor key which adds gloom to the words. The only long pause he has marked in the music is at the end of the first line, "Sally is gone that was so kindly" - even the happiest and strongest of material things are not impervious to Time and with its passing changes quickly come. The poet is fearful of change and what it might do to society. It, like the briar, grows "blindly", and sometimes this blindness brings downfall, as he suggests in the second verse:

Ha'nacker Hill is in Desolation:  
 Ruin a-top and a field unploughed.  
 And Spirits that call on a fallen nation  
 Spirits that loved her calling aloud:  
 Spirits abroad in a windy cloud.

In the music there is a long note on the last syllable of "desolation" and "nation" and the whole last line is sung on the tonic giving a most mournful effect. Because it is written in six-eight time we might expect the poem to run brightly but the poet has dotted and shortened notes in such a way that it has slowed the tempo to a slow walk - but always you hear the tread of the feet. This particular verse is slightly reminiscent of the "December" sonnet where "hoar Time" stalks around the house.

The third verse reiterates Belloc's thesis that with the disappearance of the inns, the thatched cottages, the mills and the country festivities, England was losing its foundations. The land was becoming deserted as the people moved into the towns and cities. Let this happen, he said, and

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"England's done." The contrast in sound in the third and fourth lines of the last stanza indicate the change that is coming over the country places. The short, crisp syllables of the merry line are exchanged for the long vowels of the "nevermore" mood.

Spirits that call and no one answers;  
 Ha'nacker's down and England's done.  
 Wind and thistle for pipe and dancers  
 And never a ploughman under the Sun.  
 Never a ploughman. Never a one.

Once again the music is revealing of the mood of the poet. He has long notes - at end of measures and off beat - on the final syllables of "answers" and "dancers". The last line is once more all on the tonic with a sudden drop to the leading note on the second last word. In a minor key this leading note always produces a mournful, pathetic feeling and when "Ha'nacker Mill" is sung one can hardly help but notice the icy chill which is communicated through the sound.

Sally and the mill are symbolic of something much greater. "Sally" represents all the country folk who have left their thatched cottages for the brick tenements of the city. Now that the people have gone there is no one to work the land, so "the Briar grows blindly", the "field is unploughed" and there is "never a ploughman under the Sun." The "mill" with its silenced "clapper" and fallen "sweeps" shows the utter desertion of the Downs - a desertion which will imperil the economic situation of the nation. And only

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the "Spirits" know and understand but they are borne aloft in "a windy cloud" and their calls receive no answer. They are the "folk" who loved England, who worked for England, who fed England. But they have no successors - "Spirits that call and no one answers." There is a strong personal note in this poem and Belloc develops one of his favorite prophecies: to the effect that England will become weak if property is not returned to individual owners. The desolation of this Shiremark Mill on Sussex Road, says he, might be a first step to state control of the whole country. At any rate it is a sign post pointing in that direction.

The most popular of the songs is "Tarantella" and we find it in many anthologies.

Do you remember an Inn  
 Miranda?  
 Do you remember an Inn?  
 And the tedding and the spreading  
 Of the straw for a bedding,  
 And the flees that tease in the High Pyrenees  
 And the wine that tasted of the tar?  
 And the jeers and the cheers of the young muleteers  
 (Under the vine of the dark verandah)?  
 Do you remember an Inn, Miranda,  
 Do you remember an Inn?  
 And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers  
 Who hadn't got a penny  
 And who weren't paying any,  
 And the hammer at the doors and the Din?  
 And the Hip! Hop! Hap!  
 Of the clap  
 Of the hands to the twirl and the swirl  
 Of the girl gone chancing,  
 Glancing,  
 Dancing,  
 Backing and advancing,  
 Snapping of a clapper to the spin  
 Out and in -----

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And the Ting, Tong, Tang, of the Guitar!  
 Do you remember an Inn,  
 Miranda?  
 Do you remember an Inn?

Never more;  
 Miranda,  
 Never more.  
 Only the high peaks hoar;  
 And Aragon a torrent at the door.  
 No sound  
 In the walls of the Halls where falls  
 The tread  
 Of the feet of the dead to the ground  
 No sound:  
 But the boom  
 Of the far Waterfall like Doom. 18

After a first reading of the "Tarantella" we might pause to account for the popularity of the poem. The very name evokes a picture of brilliant costume, colour, flowers, beautiful girls, in short a festival day. Most readers will be quick to weave a romance around Miranda and the poet and hence the story will be attractive. The very sound of the words and the lilt of the lines are appealing and we can easily imagine that through our hearts throbs the hum of the guitar and the beat of the castanets. All this is merely on the surface but it is what catches hold of the reader. Then he reads it a second time, perhaps a third; now he finds what lies beneath the superficialities.

It is not surprising to hear Belloc sing - for the "Tarantella" has its music too - about inns. He has a number of essays extolling them, and of course we already know his interest in and love for their antiquity, their simplicity,

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as well as the good wine they sold. This particular inn of the "Tarantella" is a fictitious one - though it combines the characteristics of many of the poet's favourite haunts. Belloc had often been to Spain, and was especially interested in that part of the country surrounding the Pyrennees, no doubt because of its proximity to his beloved France. Time was when crossing the mountains was a real feat, but as time passed the difficulties were surmounted by motor-roads and a railway that runs down the Valley of Canfranc and along the river Aragon.

I, and many others, always assumed that the inn at Canfranc was the inn of Miranda in the song "Tarantella". But Belloc told me that he had no particular inn in mind when he wrote the song. <sup>19</sup>

The very fact that Belloc saw once more with frightening reality the complete triumph of modern invention over established tradition, was sufficient to call forth a song in memory.

Jebb would lead us to believe, and rightly so, that this poem was the product of "prolonged experiment and assiduous polishing". For purposes of study it is interesting to note what parts of the poem were written and rewritten.

To quote again from Jebb:

I have before me as I write, a sheet of paper on which are written, in handwriting often

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18. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, Nonesuch, 1954, p. 64-5.

19. Morton, J.B., Belloc, A Memoir, p. 67.



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poem. He has tried and succeeded in bringing the spirit of the Tarantella dance into the lines. We might recall here the legend concerning it. It seems that the people were terrified of the bite of the tarantula and thought that the only cure for the poison was to dance as quickly and as wildly and as long as possible. This mood is set at the beginning of the fourth line and ends at the fifteenth. Then the time quickens to full speed until suddenly "Out and in....." and the dancer falls prostrate, worn out and breathless.

In an oral rendition of the poem we can see more easily the means by which the poet has achieved this effect. His use of consonants is excellent. With words such as "Hip", "Hop", "hap", "clap" and "Clapper" he makes us hear the rattle of the castanets marking out the rhythm of the music on the guitar. The "ing" words are very well chosen and give us the measure of the dance. The poet has made abundant use of anapests and trochees which are those most suited to the rhythm of the Spanish dancing. The one-phrase or one-word lines are like clear-cut steps, each with its own character but all together forming a unified whole.

The question "Do you remember an Inn?" occurs six times in the poem. There again is that nostalgic longing for the days and institutions of the past which are now but a memory. After each question the poet describes a picture that had once been a frequent and familiar scene around the inns of

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Europe. The first is of the activity in and around the inn - the preparations for the night, the shouts of the mule-drivers, the evening meal for the guests, the noise at the doors. The second picture is that of the girl dancing to the strains of the Spanish guitar, indicating the happiness existent in these mountainous countryside places before the advent of modern train-loads of tourists. The third is a sorrowful picture and the sharp change of mood indicates the knife-like wound which change inflicts upon his heart - change which seemed to be constantly playing a finale to the symphony of his loves.

The contrast in the last two sections of the poem is very well done. The first is in dance rhythm, quick metre, short syllables, light consonants, moving words and happy thought. The second is almost akin to a funeral procession, making generous use of long vowel sounds, lengthened consonants, and such words as "nêver" and "no". The use of the anapests in both sections and yet with such different effect in each, is both clever and descriptive.

The music for the "Tarantella" song was composed by Belloc and appears in a collected edition of his prose and verse. <sup>21</sup> To know the music is certainly an aid to the reading of the poem because the dotted quarter, eighth or sixteenth

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21. Roughead, W.N., editor, Hilaire Belloc: An Anthology of his Prose and Verse, London, 1951, p. 190-191.

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notes are clearly indicative of the tempo at which the poet expects us to sing or read. It is interesting to note that one writer said of the music:

How wise you were to compose your own music.  
Just imagine what some composer would have  
made of the song about Miranda. <sup>22</sup>

and the speaker then went on to perform "a highly amusing parody" of some of Belloc's words in "drawing-room ballad melody."

Almost in direct contrast with the light music of the songs is the satirical stacatto of the Ballades. Of the eighteen which appear in the collected edition of the verse, all but one are dated mementoes of the Boer War, religious controversy, literary battles for royalties and honest criticism and days of depression and strikes in England. One alone is outstanding and timeless; the others, though good examples of the ballade form, are passé except as indications of the social conditions of Victorian and Edwardian times.

The ballade is the longest, least artificial and most significant of the French forms (triolet, rondel, rondeau, vilanelle). It consists of three stanzas of either eight or ten lines followed by an envoy of four or five. The envoy serves for both dedication and conclusion of the poem. The last

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22. Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, quotation of D.B. Wyndham Lewis, p. 42.

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of the first stanza forms the refrain which is repeated as the last line of every stanza and of the envoy. The attractiveness of a ballade is based upon the exquisitely light touch which is put upon it by the poet, otherwise there is a lack of the music which is the most pleasureable characteristic of this type of verse.

Belloc has handled the form with his usual dexterity and because of the lilt of the metre, the touch of humour here and there, as well as the organ tones of the ballade in honour of the Blessed Virgin, this poetic form has been included with the songs. On the other hand they have not the appeal of the songs and are weakened by the cutting criticism which is superimposed upon what might have been delightful poems.

There are some merits common to the ballades in general. There is fun and good humour and even though in some places the satire is cutting we can still imagine the poet enjoying himself as he wrote. "The Ballade of Cigar Covers" might be considered almost nonsense verse and the thought is unimportant but the lilt and humour are amusing. For example the second verse runs,

It is indeed! Oh Dark Primordial Curse!  
 (I cannot think of any rhyme but "hen",  
 Nor after that of anything but "hearse",  
 Nor after that of anything but "fen",  
 Nor - now I have it! - Louder than Big Ben  
 I hear the challenge of unconquered Hell  
 Call from the limits of our human ken:

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"It is the covers of cigars that tell." 23

In ballades such as "The Ballade of Hell and Mrs. Roebeck", the poet has mingled fun with satire, for though he jokingly says

I'm going out to dine at Gray's  
 With Bertie Morden, Charles and Kit,  
 And Manderly who never pays,  
 And Jane who wins in spite of it,  
 And Algernon who won't admit  
 The truth about his curious hair  
 And teeth that very nearly fit: -  
 And Mrs. Roebeck will be there. 24

at the same time he makes a point against the would-be élite who like to be thought literary minded - so much so, that when they hear about the success of some actor in "one of Mr. Twister's plays" they go to see it even though "we go to yawn at it". What they prefer, of course, is the smoky air of "Number 20, Taunton Square" where they can feast their minds on the "smoke, and drink, and dance" of their own milieu. This verse echoes a bit of Elliot's "Waste Land", though Eliot might not readily admit any likeness.

Belloc has given background to the ballades by the use of proper names. It is amazing how he does this so adroitly and still keeps the rhythm and the form of the poem. And no name is used without a purpose. Each suggests a person, place or situation at which he wishes to aim his arrow. When he

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23, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Roughead, Nonesuch, page 134.

24. *ibid.* p. 129.

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dines at "Gray's" with "Bertie, Charles, Kit, Jane and Algernon" we can also follow him to a very clean and proper middle-class restaurant. There we listen to a mundane conversation punctuated with shop-talk. At the very mention of "Reverend Doctor Leigh, D.D." we can readily imagine a lean faced, bespectacled incumbent, pouring studiously over his books - he has been engaged in the study of the Trinity and the Immaculate Virgin. But "His Lordship, the Bishop", pompous and red-faced through anger tells him "in manner far from mild" that his study is useless and his enshrining of "the Female Figure with a Child" is to come to a speedy end. His mockery of the "Heresiarchs" is made more biting by the adjectives used. We see "the horrible Bohemian Huss", "The tedious Wycliffe", "Hume, who made a dreadful fuss about the Resurrection Day and said it was ridiculous" and "Smith, the gallant Mormon lad."

In the "Ballade to Our Lady of Czestchowa", the one timeless and truly beautiful ballade among them all, Belloc dispenses with all satire, sarcasm, belittling of his enemies or nonsense. Here he shows himself to be Our Lady's minstrel and expresses his thoughts with sincere emotion. The poem is a hymn of praise as we can readily perceive from the salutation:

Lady and Queen and Mystery manifold  
And very Regent of the untroubled sky. 25

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There is a dual inspiration for the writing of the poem - love of Our Lady and Love of Poland of whom Our Lady of Czestochowa is the patroness. Belloc had made numerous visits to Poland and judging from an anecdote told by Speaight regarding the presentation of the ballade at the shrine, the poet must have been quite familiar with the devotions at Czestochowa and the miracles wrought there.

After hearing Mass in the great church of the monastery...Belloc took the ballade, mounted in a black frame, to the chapel, where the tear-stained face of the Mother of God looks down upon the multitudes who pray before it. He then hung it on the wall on the Gospel side of the altar among the swords, medals, gold ships, and golden arms and legs which bore witness to Our Lady's intercession. <sup>26</sup>

And how beautifully he tells us that it is only through Our Lady that he will persevere through life solid in his Faith.

You shall receive me when the clouds are high  
With evening and the sheep attain the fold.

But you shall lead me to the lights, and I  
Shall hymn you in a harbour story told.

You shall restore me, O my last Ally,  
To vengeance and the glories of the bold. <sup>27</sup>

The third stanza brings the poem to its climax. At first we see Our Lady appearing in a dream to St. Hilda. There is an "untroubled sky" gladdened by the "woodland music" and

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26. Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, London, Hollis and Carter, 1957, page 463.

27. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 128.

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high clouds of evening. Then we see Her as Stella Maris the only hope of those sailors who must travel when

Steep are the seas and savaging and cold  
 In broken waters terrible to try;  
 And vast against the winter night the wold,  
 And harbourless for any sail to lie.

But in the last She is the Queen of all Heaven and Earth - Queen of the Martyrs, Queen of all Saints, Queen of Peace. She is there on the battlefield just as She is present at the peace parley.

Help of the half-defeated, House of Gold,  
 Shrine of the Sword, and Tower of Ivory;  
 Splendour apart, supreme and aureoled,  
 The Battler's vision and the World's reply.

In this ballade we see the ability of the poet to paint with words. Almost every phrase evokes a picture in our imagination, and is portrayed more clearly because of his own identification with the scenes described. Not only does he believe in Our Lady but she is the centre of all.

This is the faith that I have held and hold,  
 And this is that in which I mean to die.

He is the sheep and the fold is Heaven; he is the sailor on life's tempestuous sea and Mary is the Star who will guide him to the harbour; he is the soldier of Christ who will battle with his pen to publish the faith and Mary is his inspiration "the Battler's Vision."

Prince of the degradations, bought and sold,  
 These verses, written in your crumbling sty,  
 Proclaim the faith that I have held and hold  
 And publish that in which I mean to die.

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The poet has gained effect in this poem by the light rhythm in the first six lines of each stanza contrasted with the slow, even metre and the long syllables of the last two lines or the refrain. Such phrases as "Lady and Queen", "Mystery manifold", "woodland music passing by", "steep are the seas" and "splendour apart" give variety to the usual iambic tetrameter or pentameter and procure the desired wonder and reverence one experiences while speaking to Mary.

Of songs, Belloc tells us that almost all people can write them and certainly all can sing them. He had his favorites, most especially the Benediction hymns. Of the "O Salutaris" he told Merton that he believed the words "with all the strength of his emotion and all the power of his intellect." What a happy coincidence then, that as he lay dying at Guildford, his last conscious moments were spent in listening to the familiar words from the Chapel above him

Qui vitam sine termino  
Nobis donet in patria.

Who gives us life without  
end in our native country.

As song was his joy throughout life so it was his consolation at death. At last he was to cross to the haven of rest, to that shore towards which his Ship had been directed these many years. His songs were sung but the music of his life was not silenced. He was leaving it to posterity in his verse.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE CHILD VERSE

We approach Belloc's Child Verse much as we do a great deal of his other work - as being in the realm of the unexpected. Those of us in Canada or the United States who might have thought of, or may already have presented the "Cautionary Tales" to our children will be skeptical of their being part of a child's literary diet. On the other hand we know that their popularity has been and still is tremendous. Who, then, forms their reading public, and what merit have they to offer? Wherein lies their charm and given a fair chance, would the present-day child read them with enjoyment?

One of the first barriers we must break down is the adult misunderstanding of Belloc's ability to write verse at all. It is naturally difficult to see that a man who was capable of such treatises as the "Servile State" and the "History of England" in many volumes, could also be capable of whimsical musings, fervent little prayers, tales of bad and worse children for the four-year-old and up. But he has achieved just that.

Secondly we must consider the changed social milieu which has evolved during the last quarter century. Whereas twenty-five years ago children read the Classics, now they prefer a pre-digested, sugar-coated, newsprint edition

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familiarly known as the "classic comics". Once children learned memory gems, now they seem rarely to know even the nursery rhymes. Belloc has penned both.

As a result of the attitude of adults and our re-shaped society we have a third consideration to make - the changed character of childhood itself. There was a day when Belloc's "Matilda" and "Charles Augustus Fortescue", to say nothing of the "Beasts" and "More Beasts", would have taught the child a lesson in manners, literature, and even a bit of geography and natural science thrown in. And he would have had some fun in the process. Now in this highly mechanized age of dome-cars, television and cinerama, books, and more especially books of poetry, are passé. We must be careful, then, to take an objective view of Belloc's child poetry and judge it by its merits rather than its present-day popularity.

That it has merits is obvious from the reviews it received in the past. The first edition of the child verse appeared as early as 1896 and marked Belloc's initial success in the publishing world.<sup>1</sup> This edition of the "Bad Child's Book of Beasts" was charmingly illustrated by Basil Blackwood. The success was immediate and the first edition sold out in four days with the second printing proceeding at once. It is

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1. Belloc, Hilaire, The Bad Child's Book of Beasts, verses by H.B., Pictures by B.T.B., London, Alden and Co., London, 1896.

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interesting to note here that just as Belloc had real people in mind when he wrote the child verse, so Blackwood used real people for his drawings. We are told that Sir Harold Nicolson remembers sitting for a portrait at Clandboye, dressed in an Eton suit.

'He was a small man rather like early pictures of his father Lord Dufferin with the dark skin and hair which the Sheridans inherited from the Lindley's. He spoke in a slow but rather positive voice and to me he seemed the very glass of fashion.' The Spectator of 1898 was quick to notice that the 'sparkle of Sheridan's bon mots' had 'found its way into his great-great-grandson's drawings.'<sup>2</sup>

Within three months of publication four thousand books of "Beasts" had been sold. The Academy and the Spectator were loud in their praises, the former ranking H.B. equal to Lewis Carroll and superior to Edward Lear; the latter observing that

books of nonsense are the best cure in the world for that laughter of fools which is like the crackling of thorns under a pot, and for that childish assumption of virtue and sagacity which so completely fails in concealing the vanity from which it proceeds.<sup>3</sup>

So successful was the work that on April 1, 1897, while Belloc was in America, a publication was arranged with an American firm. The whole press seemed unanimous in its praise and Miss

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2. Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, quoted from a letter dated May 31, 1955, page 112.

3. *ibid.* quoted from the Spectator, December 26, 1897, page 115.

4. *ibid.* page 114.

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Clara Butt, the famous English soprano, honoured the "Cautionary Tales" by singing them throughout the country while on her concert tours.

In 1899 the "Moral Alphabet" appeared, followed by "Cautionary Tales for Children" in 1907, both illustrated by Basil Blackwood. Of this latter publication it was said:

Neither Belloc's hand nor B.T.B.'s had lost its cunning since "A Moral Alphabet". The misfortunes of Matilda and Godolphin Horne, of Henry King and Charles Augustus Fortescue, reminded all those outside the author's private circle that the member from South Salford still knew how to play the fool. <sup>5</sup>

1930 brought the last of the collected volumes of child verse—the "New Cautionary Tales".

Who has been the reading public of this children's verse? Roland Hill tells us that Belloc's nonsense verse has long become the "household property of big and little children." <sup>6</sup> Renée Haynes says that his child verse has "lit laughter in three generations." <sup>7</sup> One reviewer gives us an inkling into the reason for our not being more familiar with the child poetry. As yet it is not too well known in America.

His (Belloc's) "Cautionary Tales" and "Bad Child's Book of Beasts" are all too little known, and they contain great delight for

5. Speaight, Robert, Life of Hilaire Belloc, page 270.

6. Hill, Roland, "Hilaire Belloc", in the Ave Maria, volume 78, No. 12, Sept. 19, 1953, page 9.

7. Haynes, Renee, Hilaire Belloc, Longman's Green and Co., London, page, 29.

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grown-ups as well as for listening children. Children should be read aloud to, far more than they are, and, as they grow older, what better poems than these have been written for them? <sup>8</sup>

Belloc has a love and reverence for children and speaks to them with the respect they deserve. There is never a trace of baby-talk or childish prattle. As one person has put it: "No namby-pamby talk for him." He speaks out, yet speaks beautifully; admonishes but does not harangue; makes sense but makes fun at the same time. As an example, let us look at the introduction to his "Bad Child's Book of Beasts".

I call you bad, my little child  
 Upon the title page,  
 Because a manner rude and wild  
 Is common at your age.

The Moral of this priceless work  
 (If rightly understood)  
 Will make you - from a little Turk -  
 Unnaturally good.

Do not as evil children do,  
 Who on the slightest grounds  
 Will imitate the Kangaroo,  
 With wild unmeaning bounds.

Do not as children badly bred,  
 Who eat like little Hogs,  
 And when they have to go to bed  
 Will whine like Puppy Dogs:

Who take their manners from the Ape,  
 Their habits from the Bear,  
 Indulge the loud unseemly jape,  
 And never brush their hair.

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8. Ready, W.B., "Hilaire Belloc: His Poetry", in Books on Trial, Vol.X, No. 1, June 1951, page 4.

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But so control your actions that  
 Your friends may all repeat,  
 "This child is dainty as the Cat,  
 And as the Owl discreet." 9

There is no lisping syllable here. Belloc is addressing the child in an almost "man-to-man" fashion. He tells him that it is quite common to be "bad" at his age, so the child doesn't immediately recoil from what he might be inclined to think a personal reprimand. Then the misdemeanours of childhood are listed - clumsy deportment, gluttony, whining, boorishness, impoliteness and neglect of personal appearance. But there is fun here too. With each vice goes a simile or metaphor which not only makes the child laugh but makes a far deeper impression. The youngster can picture the gracelessness of the Kangaroo, the whining of a spoiled puppy, the bad manners of a monkey and the lazy movements of the bear. Most children have seen these animals at the Zoo, but in case they haven't, Belloc has thought of that too. He has the illustrations of some or all of these in the pages that follow, and most youngsters will recognize them, as well as themselves, when they come upon the picture. Notice that Belloc does not dwell on the virtues nor on the moral of the poem. He expects that that will speak for itself. Besides he is a good teacher and realizes that excessive moralizing does little, if any good. He merely sends the child on his merry way with the advice

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9. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 235-6.

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that if he listens to the stories about the beasts, his friends will say of him that

This child is dainty as the Cat,  
And as the Owl discreet.

The rhyme scheme and the metre is simplicity itself following the same pattern as

Jack and Jill went up the hill,  
To fetch a pail of water.

and all the other nursery rhymes that the child has already learned. The animal names are all used at the end of the lines and therefore rhyme with each other or with some other important word, making the verse easy to memorize. It is not long before the poem becomes part of his education - education, because somehow, points made by a stranger oftentimes carry more weight than when said by a parent. It is amazing how many of the rhymes learned in childhood remain with us into later life, very often still helping conscience to judge rightly!

The introduction to "More Beasts" is somewhat in the same strain but is addressed to the parents:

The parents of the learned child  
(His father and his mother)  
Were utterly aghast to note  
The facts he would at random quote  
On creatures curious, rare and wild;  
And wondering asked each other: 10

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10. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 241.

## THE CHILD VERSE

82.

Just as in the former introduction Belloc compliments the child in the last stanza, so he gives a complimentary opening here, "The parents of the learned child". Quite obviously that is the child who is reading this book. What child is not proud to be made much of? And when he is, what child won't be glad to hear more - in this case to read more? Right away the poet establishes a friendly relationship with his young reader. The parents have brains, they have books and yet they cannot understand how their children know so many things - why the Guinea-Pig is born without a tail and why the Indian Elephant will read the Times. Did the children visit the zoo and tip the keeper to tell them? Or did they interview the wise pelican who knows all things? Then the child has the answer:

"Oh! no," said he, in humble tone,  
 With shy but conscious look,  
 "Such facts I never could have known  
 But for this little book." 11

What better way to make a child read, than to make him feel that when he does he will have all the answers!

The tone of these two poems is conversational and Belloc maintains the same light, easy chatter throughout the poetry that follows. The vocabulary that he uses is not always easy and may be criticized on the grounds of "Will the child understand?" This is where the parent is expected to take part.

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11. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 241.

## THE CHILD VERSE

83.

If the child meets an unfamiliar word the explanation will be as educative as the poem itself - more so actually. Also we must remember that the child of the beginning of the century had accumulated a good deal more vocabulary than present-day children of the same age. Too, European youngsters are recognized as being more precocious. This brings to mind H.B. when he was a child of four. Marie Belloc-Lowndes tells us that his comment on seeing a picture of the Flight into Egypt was:

It's lucky that they hadn't then made the  
Suez Canal or that donkey couldn't have  
got across. <sup>12</sup>

Though written for little ones, Belloc has made his child verse subtle enough to make good reading for the adults. There are several shrewd references whose implications are meant, in fact, just for the parent, and at which only an adult could smile. For example he throws a quip at the parents who apparently know so much and yet often fail to be able to answer the simple truths:

Our brains are trained, our books are big,  
And yet we always fail  
To answer why the Guinea-pig  
Is born without a tail.

Later he gets in a jest at the London Times:

Whereas the Indian Elephant  
Will only read the Times.

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12. Lowndes, Marie Belloc-, I Too Have Lived In Arcadia.

## THE CHILD VERSE

84.

He had it in for those Victorian parents who always "appeared" so correct, and yet left their children - except when on exhibition - in the hands of their Nurse. She was left to care for them but the parents believed they were fulfilling their duty.

Or even by an artful plan  
Deceived our watchful eyes.

The footnote to this poem is ridiculous and Belloc meant it to be so. It is a gibe at those literary men and historians who in Belloc's opinion felt they had to annotate anything and everything before it was worth reading. (The foot-note was a particular *bête noir* of Belloc who annotates nothing and thus becomes a *bête noir* to students!) And so in reference to the "Wanderoo" he writes:

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes called the 'Lion-tailed  
or tufted Baboon of Ceylon.

This interweaving of ideas for both the child and the parent is characteristic of most of the poems in "Beasts" and "More Beasts". Belloc was always glad to have an opportunity to make fun of the Oxford dons and he does so in his poem about the whale. It is not a table fish, but you may melt his blubber down for oil - to replace the "colza" bean (a product of the soil) These are important scientific facts, so worthwhile that:

These facts should all be noted down  
And ruminated on,  
By every boy in Oxford town  
Who wants to be a Don.

## THE CHILD VERSE

85.

The wealthy, possibly the nouveaux riches, are scoffed at in "The Yak". When the child realizes that a yak is a large ox found in Central Asia and then hears it called "a friend to the children" and the Tartar's "nursery pet", therein lies the fun for him. But in the last verse the child is told:

Then tell your papa where the Yak can be got,  
 And if he is awfully rich  
 He will buy you the creature - or else he will not.  
 I cannot be positive which. 13

How the parent of the spoiled child should sit up and take notice!

There is one poem, and only one, which satirizes the politics of the day. Belloc, at this time, was little in sympathy with the isolationist policies of the reigning monarchy and the party in power and proclaimed himself early a Republican. "The Big Baboon" is doubtless the type of politician against whom Belloc raged.

But if he dressed respectably  
 And let his whiskers grow,  
 How like this Big Baboon would be  
 To Mr. ~~So~~-and-so! 14

We might mention here that the illustration for this poem is particularly good and perhaps means more than the others. The Baboon with his high silk hat, fur-collared coat, and sufficiently rounded shoulders surely looks suspiciously like the

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13. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 237.  
 14. ibid. page 236.

## THE CHILD VERSE

86.

politician Blackwood intended him to represent! It is almost one of those times when we are ready to "button-hole" and put a name on the caricature.

The literary men are aimed at in "The LLama" and in one fell sweep Belloc describes them:

The Llama is a woolly sort of fleecy hairy goat,  
With an indolent expression and an undulating throat  
Like an unsuccessful literary man. <sup>15</sup>

There the adult gets the point, but the child likes the word picture to describe the llama, "a woolly sort of fleecy hairy goat"; the rhythm, which is easily recognizable on the first reading; the sound of the big words: "indolent", "undulating" and "unsuccessful". These points together with the illustration make these verse fascinating.

At the turn of the century bacteriology was becoming more and more important and the scientists' findings were popular talk among people in general. To the end of his days Belloc had a very definite repugnance for medical experimentation and he has immortalized his scepticism in "The Microbe".

The Microbe is so very small  
You cannot make him out at all.  
But many sanguine people hope  
To see him through a microscope.  
His jointed tongue that lies beneath  
A hundred curious rows of teeth;  
His seven tufted tails with lots  
Of lovely pink and purple spots,

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15. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 245.

## THE CHILD VERSE

87.

On each of which a pattern stands,  
 Composed of forty separate bands;  
 His eyebrows of a tender green;  
 All these have never yet been seen -  
 But Scientists, who ought to know,  
 Assure us that they must be so...  
 Oh! Let us never, never doubt  
 What nobody is sure about! 16

The same sort of thing is satirized in the "Moral Alphabet":

"Q" for Quinine, which children take.  
 With jam and little bits of cake.  
 MORAL  
 How idiotic! Can Quinine  
 Replace Cold Baths and Sound Hygiene? 17

Amusing to all is Belloc's own "sales-talk" for his book.

Under "R" he speaks again to the book-reviewers:

"R" the Reviewer, reviewing my book  
 At which he had barely intended to look;  
 But the very first lines upon "A" were enough  
 To convince him the Verses were excellent stuff.  
 So he wrote, without stopping for several days  
 In terms of extreme but well-merited praise.  
 To quote but one passage: "No Person" (says he)  
 "Will be really content without purchasing three,  
 While a parent will send for a dozen or more,  
 And strew them about on the Nursery floor.  
 The Versification might call for some strictures  
 Were it not for its singular wit; while the Pictures,  
 Tho' handling of line is a little defective,  
 Make up amply in verve what they lack in perspective.

## MORAL

The habit of constantly telling the Truth  
 Will lend an additional lustre to Youth. 18

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16. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 246.  
 17. ibid, page 256.  
 18. ibid, page 256.

## THE CHILD VERSE

88.

"Cautionary Tales" and "New Cautionary Tales" have children as the characters. They are refreshingly new and different, but they have sufficient resemblance to the Victorian child writers to make them parodies - to the disparagement of "Meddlesome Matty", "Little Suck a Thumb" and the little girl "with the curl". In the introduction, the Bellocian description of the "Tales" is "verse designed for the admonition of children between the ages of eight and fourteen years."

The whole atmosphere here is one of jollification of the child reader. The lines are short, the characters are real and the pictures are clear-cut. There is no doubt that Jim, who ran away from his Nurse was a very spoiled boy; that Henry King who swallowed bits of string was disobedient; that Matilda told lies without thought or hesitation; that John Vavassour de Quentin Jones was a little vandal. But the stories are told with a laugh and a chuckle. Nevertheless a child can see through the joke and pick out the lesson - it is quite evident. Jim's own way led him to disaster in the lion's cage; Henry King choked to death on a string; Matilda was burned to death and John lost his inheritance.

Again, in the mind of the adult reader a lesson takes form. Why are the children the way they are? Because of the ineffectual training given by the parents. Take Jim for example. He has been reminded so often that he must never leave his Nurse in a crowd:

## THE CHILD VERSE

89.

You know - at least you ought to know,  
 For I have often told you so -  
 That children never are allowed  
 To leave their Nurses in a crowd. 19

He was doted on by the friends of the family who

- gave him Tea, and Cakes and Jam,  
 And slices of delicious Ham,  
 And chocolate with pink inside,  
 And little Tricycles to ride. 19

Of the parents we hear nothing until after the fateful accident  
 when Jim was eaten by the lion. Then they suddenly appear.

His Mother, as she dried her eyes,  
 Said, "Well - it gives me no surprise,  
 He would not do as he was told!"  
 His father, who was self-controlled,  
 Bade all the children round attend  
 To James' miserable end,  
 And always keep a-hold of Nurse  
 For fear of finding something worse. 19

For the children there lies the moral - to do as they are told.  
 For the parents there is a scathing indictment of the individuals who have absolutely no concern over the upbringing of their children. They "appear" to be so correct and yet neglect the duties that matter most.

The tone of the "Cautionary Tales" is more conversational than the "Books of Beasts". The poet manages this cleverly by inserting such expressions as "You know", "Now, just imagine", or "The nicest child I ever knew." Or else he introduces conversation between two people, for example

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19. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, pages 260-261.

## THE CHILD VERSE

90.

"Mamma" said Amanda "I want to know what  
Our relatives mean when they say....."

"The term" said her Mother, "is certain to pain,  
And is quite inexcusably rude...."

and the mother goes on to answer Amanda's queries, each of  
the following eight stanzas being her direct words. The last  
stanza is the child's response and thanks:

"Oh, thank you Mamma!" said Amanda at that,  
And ran off to the innocent band  
Who were merrily burying Thomas the Cat  
Right up to his neck in the sand. <sup>20</sup>

Again he might give the child's words, as in the poem about  
Tom and his pony Jack. Tom rides off shouting:

"And shouting "Yoicks!" and "Tally-Ho!"  
And "Heads I win!" and "Tails below!" <sup>21</sup>

There are a few poems which are just pure fun - they  
were not meant to teach, to preach, to satirize or to mock.  
These are the ones we see quoted most often in anthologies,  
newspapers and magazines and unfortunately Belloc's prowess  
as is often judged by them alone. We might quote here two  
as examples of this particular type:

The Polar Bear is unaware  
Of cold that cuts me through:  
For why? He has a coat of hair,  
I wish I had one too! <sup>22</sup>

and the oft-recited:

I shoot the Hippopotamus  
With bullets made of platinum,

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20. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 284-6.  
21. ibid. page 279.  
22. ibid. page 236.

## THE CHILD VERSE

91.

Because if I use leaden ones  
His hide is sure to flatten 'em. 23

What we have studied so far has been the light, comic, fun-loving, rollicking side of the Child Verse. This is the child's food in time. What we have left is his food for eternity. We have mentioned already that Belloc had a deep reverence and love for children - witness the positive proof of this in the fact that his friends all say of him that he never had difficulty meeting their children and their children in turn were always happy to see him. They loved the man with the big black cloak and the blackthorn stick and he loved them, wrote for them, sang for them.

King's Land was the centre for all the neighbourhood children to gather. Particularly important was Christmas time at the Belloc home (immortalized in the delightful essay "One Remaining Christmas"). Sometimes as many as fifty children and adults would arrive on Christmas eve, and with H.B. as master of ceremonies there would be songs, dances, refreshments and a magic lantern show. Shortly before midnight they would gather around the Crib to sing carols, and then off to Grinstead or Storrington for Midnight Mass. There was a special song for this annual occasion:

There were three Kings and oh! What a sight!  
One was yellow and one was white,  
And one was as black as Epiphany night  
On Christmas Day in the morning. 24

23. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page, 237

24. Speaight, Robert, Hilaire Belloc, page 249.

## THE CHILD VERSE

92.

Notice the immense amount of content packed in those four lines. In such a short space is the whole story of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. True the child may not as yet know all the details with their proper meaning, but when the time comes for him to learn the story, he will remember the little song and joyfully fill in the rest.

Belloc's devotion to the Child Jesus is striking and it is so much a part of him that his prayer-poetry for little ones is spontaneous - beautiful and at the same time full of meaning. One of his own prayers, written on the back of a letter to his mother, might well be classified among the child verse:

Little Child Jesus was born in a stable;  
 I am a child and I pray when I'm able.  
 I pray when I'm able and then at the end  
 I remember to pray very hard for a friend  
 Who will come in a hollow boat over the sea;  
 Little Child Jesus have mercy on me. <sup>25</sup>

Immediately there is established a bond of oneness of the child with the little Jesus. They are both children, so the talk between them will be easy. So often little ones cannot reach grown-ups; sometimes they are even a bit fearful of them. So Belloc makes the prayer to the Child-God. All children are familiar with the scene at Bethlehem; so this establishes the composition of place. Most small children are just learning to pray and in their own little way, pray

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25. Lowndes, M.B., The Young Hilaire Belloc, Kennedy, 1956.

## THE CHILD VERSE

93.

when they are able. They pray usually for what they need, and then as the child in the poem, pray for those they love.

I pray when I'm able and then at the end  
I remember to pray very hard for a friend.

The second last line of the poem is a beautiful bit of imagery and is strangely reminiscent of some of the lines of "Wynken, Blynken and Nod" who one night sailed away in a wooden shoe:

They sailed the river of crystal light  
Intó the Sea of Dew.

But Belloc's verse has something that many of the other child poets could not give - the spiritual depth which echoes from the spirituality in his own soul.

Any occasion could become the reason for a poem - a baptism, a party or a gift. And characteristic of these child poems is the obvious fact that the composition was very special for the one who was receiving it. We could not imagine Belloc buying a greeting card with a ready-made verse on it! One almost famous piece that he has done is his "On the Gift of a Book to a Child":

Child! do not throw this book about!  
Refrain from the unholy pleasure  
Of cutting all the pictures out!  
Preserve it as your chiefest treasure.

Child have you never heard it said  
That you are heir to all the ages?  
Why, then, your hands were never made  
To tear these beautiful thick pages!

## THE CHILD VERSE

94.

Your little hands were made to take  
 The better things and leave the worse ones;  
 They also may be used to shake  
 The Massive Paws of Elder Persons.

And when your prayers complete the day,  
 Darling, your little tiny hands  
 Were also made, I think, to pray  
 For men that lose their fairy-lands. 26

This is the type of talk that children can understand and which they like to hear from an adult. There is warning here - they know very definitely what they must do - but there is fun too. There is not a command to refrain from something unless it is followed by an equally constructive suggestion. They are not to cut "all the pictures out" but instead preserve the books as their "chiefest treasure". Their little hands were not made to tear the pages of a beautiful book, but to choose good things and also to "shake the Massive Paws of Elder Persons." Could this latter be a reference to himself who was so massive? Knowing Belloc we can easily picture the towering man bending low to politely shake hands with all the little people whom he loved so dearly.

There is no moralizing or preaching but there doesn't have to be for the last stanza is beautifully suggestive to the child of what should be his last act of the day - to kneel at his bedside and say his prayers. What more lovely scene than that of innocent children, with folded hands and eyes

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26. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 63.

## THE CHILD VERSE

95.

raised to God, praying "for men who lose their fairy-lands"! What more effective way to ask for a child's prayers!

Though the poem was an "occasion verse" yet it can be used at any time by anyone. It is applicable to any child and could be voiced by any adult. But we cannot say that it is impersonal because once more the introductory word "Child!" turns the instruction to the reader - any reader. The last line is a masterpiece and, as we saw in the chapter on the sonnets, Belloc is a genius with the "resounding chord." We might have expected him to ask prayers for some person, some endeavour or for all the grown-ups with whom the child has dealings. But no, the prayers are "for men who lose their fairy-lands." There is a yearning here for the innocence of childhood, that time when the world is peopled with fairies and sprites, beings that exist in the fanciful land of the child's imagination. And Belloc does not spoil that world for them, wishing no doubt, that he might prolong it for them as long as possible.

The poem is simple, unaffected and has no trace of complicated figures of speech or rhyme scheme. The poet merely speaks and leaves the child to fill in the rest.

Another poem written on the death of one of his very young friends is equally simple, equally beautiful and filled with all the emotion of his sorrowing and broken heart.

## THE CHILD VERSE

96.

## ROSE

Rose, little Rose, the youngest of the roses,  
 My little Rose whom I may never see,  
 When you shall come to where the heart reposes  
 Cut me a Rose and send it down to me.

When you shall come into the High Rose-Gardens,  
 Where Roses bend upon Our Lady's Tree,  
 The Place of Plenitudes, the Place of Pardons,  
 Cut me a Rose and send it down to me.

In this poem we at once recognize the poet's familiarity with the lives of the Saints. The thought of "Rose" sending a flower from the "High Rose-Gardens" recalls the story of St. Dorothy whose judge commanded her to send some apples when she would reach the garden of her Heavenly Spouse. And in three days "a child of no earthly beauty" appeared with the fruit and the man was converted. We might also compare the idea with St. Thérèse's promise to send down "showers of roses" from Heaven. Perhaps too, because the little girl's name was Rose, he was reminded not only of the above stories, but also of the fact that Our Lady is the Mystical Rose and would especially intercede for this child named for Her. So he combines all these facts and weaves his own garland of verse. He asks his young friend to send him a flower of remembrance from the fragrant trees in Mary's garden in Heaven. Our Lady has so many graces to offer, "Roses bend upon Our Lady's Tree", that surely if the little Rose asked for just

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27. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 105.

## THE CHILD VERSE

97.

blossom - one Grace - for her earthly friend, Mary would be pleased to comply with the request.

Here is a picture of Heaven in the light of something the child sees and knows. Heaven is a garden, where Mary is the chief gardener. Roses are in profusion and the trees are laden with blossoms. It is a most happy place, for joys and forgiveness strike the key-note of the mood. The child, particularly the child of Canada and England, will be familiar with the fragrant loveliness of roses and he will be quick to see the similarity between the flowers on earthly bushes and Our Lady's graces on Her Heavenly tree.

This chapter has outlined what is considered the most important of the Child Verse. Some critics have added "The Modern Traveller" and "Peers and More Peers" to this particular class. One feels, however, that it is more profitable to discuss these under satire because, with the exception of the illustrations there is not too much of interest to the child. Half the fun in reading them depends upon the understanding of the "wisdom behind the wit" and in these poems it is too cleverly caustic to bring pleasure to children.

There is no doubt that the reading found in the "Beasts", the "Tales" and the miscellaneous child poetry, is wholesome. Belloc has written with an interest, a tenderness, and a Faith uncommon in child-writers. We may find one or other of the first two characteristics or a combination of

## THE CHILD VERSE

98.

both, but the third is nearly always lacking. That is what makes Belloc different for without the third he could not have written at all. It was asked at the beginning of the chapter, "Would the present-day child read this poetry with enjoyment?" Actually it would be difficult to answer the question without some experimental work. However after studying the Bellocian child verse we would suggest the trial. It would certainly be to the advantage of the child to give him the illustrated edition, since no modern book, even text-book seems acceptable without pictures. Every child loves fun, wants to be grown-up, and tries, in the majority of cases - to be good. Belloc has written for these children - our children. What better recommendation could he have?

## CHAPTER SIX

## THE SATIRE IN THE POETRY

"Satire should like a polished razor keen,  
Wound with a touch that's scarcely felt or seen."

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. <sup>1</sup>

Belloc said of François Villon that he wrote "with a style of shining acerbity like the glint of a sword edge." <sup>2</sup> It was with a "razor keen" and a "sword edge" that Belloc's own satire was penned. There is an objectivity about it that makes it remote from modern man and his introspection. But it is satire that rollicks in the drinking songs, cuts in "The Modern Traveller", sputters with rage against the "remote and ineffectual Don that dared attack my Chesterton" and is "chiselled into perfection in the epigrams." <sup>3</sup>

Satire is not easy of definition. The dictionary gives its meaning as any writing exposing and ridiculing vice or folly and a suggested synonym is "irony". Satire to us may conjure up any such words as: sarcasm, ridicule or cynicism; or such phrases as: in a humorous vein, or with an abusive tone. But after a study of a number of satirical pieces we see

1. A Satire Anthology, poems collected by Carolyn Wells, New York, Scribner's and Sons, Frontispiece.

2. Hight, Gilbert, Peoples, Places and Books, quoted in "The Pleasures of Satire", Oxford University Press, pages 232-239.

3. Newton, Douglas, "Hilaire Belloc: 1870-1953", in America, vol. 89, number 18, August 1, 1953, page 441.

that the word is synonymous with none but rather contains elements of several.

Good satire while it exposes and ridicules vices or faults, must contain elements of humour or it becomes harsh invective. It does not necessarily have to be malicious or revengeful but it must be a sincere belief of the author and must show some appreciation of human nature. Further, it must demonstrate some intellectual ability and must be in good form if it is to rank as a literary piece. It is unusual for it to be universal as it is period writing and its popularity soon vanishes.<sup>4</sup> If it is poetic satire it is even less welcome but we must not on this account fail to recognize its often excellent craftsmanship. It is interesting to note in passing that Highet takes the same view as Belloc with regard to the composition of poetic satire, in that "its creation takes a long time."<sup>5</sup>

In 1905 Carolyn Wells wrote that "at present there is no satire in America" due, she says, to the accelerated pace of life and the quick change of fads and foibles. We might add to this the fact that at that time there was no central core of principles or philosophy existing in America, from which

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4. This does not include the classics of Pope, or such essays as Swift's "Gulliver Explains Warfare" or his "Art of Political Lying". Goldsmith too has essays which have been used and read with relish in the twentieth century.

5. Highet, Gilbert, Peoples, Places and Books, pages 232-239.

an attack could be made on the things to be ridiculed. Miss Wells concludes that because time was at such a premium there was no opportunity for reading or writing satire and also "we have achieved a broader or more lateral human outlook." <sup>6</sup> She adds, though, that there was more in Britain. Indeed, this was the beginning of Belloc's hey-day<sup>7</sup> and he was writing with such ferocity and power that it caused George Bernard Shaw to describe Belloc's friendship with Chesterton as being a most dangerous thing: "The Chesterbelloc is an animal with four legs capable of doing great harm."

Belloc was a radical type of liberal spurred on, some say, by his French background and his sympathy for the revolution of 1789. Following his year's military service in the French army he went to Balliol College and during those years at Oxford he found himself in the midst of a Victorian England shining in the reflected glory of her insular attainments - an England which disdained the Latin-Catholic refinement and worshipped the German-Protestant "superiority". For one who clung to the traditions of Europe and Rome and who abominated the "Nordic Man", this was "the most unkindest cut of all". Belloc then ground his axe on critics, politics,

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6. A Satire Anthology, collected by Carolyn Wells, quoted from the Introduction.

7. 1898 - The Modern Traveller, 1904 - Emmanuel Burden, 1908 - Mr. Cluterbûck's Election.

and heretics and said that civilization in England had gone to the dogs because

"we allow five sorts of people to do what they like with us: Jews, Socialists, eugenists, Protestants and teetotalers. The Jews want our money, the Socialists want our land, the eugenists want our women, the teetotalers want our beer, and the Protestants don't know what they want. Four devils and the deep sea!" 8

Belloc's poetic satire is the spray from the fountain which is his prose. In January 1901, the reign of Victoria came to an end. In his obituary in her honour, Belloc did not dwell - as others did - on past Victorian grandeurs, but on the good example given us by the Queen in "her maturity". There in prose, we find a summary of the ideas of "The Modern Traveller" published in 1898.

We were threatened by these three evils: disaffection in every portion of our dominions, in Canada, in South Africa, and, above all, in Ireland; the corruption of the class, that in our aristocratic society, yet governs the State, and its conversion into a vulgar plutocracy; the influence in our Press, our markets, and our foreign policy of cosmopolitan finance. 9

Of the "Modern Traveller" Speaight says that it is "for many readers the summit of Belloc's comic verse." 10 The "Spectator" called it nonsense verse but when Quiller-Couch reviewed the book he saw the adventures of Commander Sin and Captain Blood

8. "Périgord Between His Hands", in Time, Vol. 62, No. 4, July 27, 1953, page 26.

9. Speaight, Robert, The Life Of Hilaire Belloc, 1957, page 153.

10. ibid. page 115.

## THE SATIRE

103.

as satire. There was laughter but it cut deep in some circles.

In type, this is a dramatic monologue. The traveller reveals to us, by his conversation with the reporter, as also by his comments on his travel companions, their journey and his sojourn in Africa, a part of his inner being. To him this has been a significant few months and he has returned home bursting with the pride of an Englishman whose courage has risen

Superior to my savage foes;  
They worshipped me at last.....  
Oh! England, who would leave thy shores -

The reporter comes from "The Daily Menace". The name is significant, for Belloc considers the Press a menace to society when it is biased, prejudiced and ready to print anything - true or false - as long as it appeals to the public. (At this period all world news was to be interpreted in the light of British Imperialism.)

We do not know the reporter's remarks or comments, but we know that he is there. The poem opens with a greeting to him:

The Daily Menace, I presume?  
Forgive the litter in the room.  
.....  
Be seated; take a pew,.  
(Excuse the phrase. I'm rather rough,  
And - pardon me! - but have you got  
A pencil?

Then the traveller begins the interview, and throughout the entire poem references are made to the reporter's obvious questions, views and comments. For example:



## THE SATIRE

105.

not a formal interview"; and "I thought - (I may have been mistook) - the earth in terror shook to feel its Conquerors land."

He is boastful:

This most expensive kind of wine  
In England is a matter  
Of pride and habit when we dine.           and

And hope they (these lines) will suffice  
To make the Caterers observe  
The kind of person whom they serve.       and

But did I flinch? I did not flinch.

He possesses the typical bull-dog courage:

And yet I felt no fear.  
Nay do not praise me - not at all -  
Courage is merely physical,  
And several people I could name  
Would probably have done the same.

When he is being tortured by the natives he did not flinch and was so bold that

In tones determined, loud and strong  
I sang a patriotic song,  
Thank Heaven it did not last for long!  
My misery was past;  
My superhuman courage rose  
Superior to my savage foes;  
They worshipped me at last.

There are echoes of the Imperialist about him as we would expect:

Oh! England, who would leave thy shores?

Rather amusing are the frequent allusions to Victorian gentility. The traveller must not speak slightingly of anyone - must never allow anyone to think lightly of his well-

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mannered efforts to speak the truth. Of course he must give the facts, but adds several times throughout the poem, and again in the very last seven lines:

Only permit me once again  
 To make it clearly understood  
 That both these honourable men,  
 Commander Sin and Captain Blood,  
 Would swear to all that I have said,  
 Were they alive;  
 But they are dead!

Commander Sin and Captain Blood are two widely contrasted characters and exemplify two of the "Three Races" in a poem of that name:

Behold, my child, the Nordic Man  
 And be as like him as you can.  
 His legs are long; his mind is slow;  
 His hair is lank and made of tow.

The most degraded of them all  
 Mediterranean we call;  
 His hair is crisp and even curls,<sup>11</sup>  
 And he is saucy with the girls.

The exaltation of the "Nordic" and the "despisal" of the "Latin" - both opinions prevalent in the England of his day - is one of Belloc's favourite themes. He constantly fought against both and in the "Modern Traveller" we cannot help but recognize a caricature of the two.

Captain William Blood was the Nordic - affectionately called "Bill" (with apologies, no doubt, To Kaiser Wilhelm,

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11. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 221. The second verse on the "Alpine Race" has been omitted here as it does not concern "The Modern Traveller."

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also familiarly known as "Bill".) Born in 1853, he was now the strong, masterful, patriotic, exquisitely bred gentleman of forty-five. "Love of country haunted his every thought" and this "self-respecting guest" was invited to all the "Parties in season".

Poor Commander Henry Sin was the wild, unkempt, untaught Mediterranean. His wiry limbs and dark tangled hair, together with his drunkenness and his inability to be kept in the "Club", showed the bohemian nature of his character. His glance was "imperative and hot" in contrast with the "rapid glance" of disdain of William.

Commander Sin, we gather, belonged to the Foreign Legion - or at least we know that he was busily engaged in fighting in South America, India and the Seas beyond. William Blood was

A sort of modern Buccaneer  
Commercial and refined.  
Like all great men, his chief affairs  
Were buying stocks and selling shares.

The Bill described here, typifies the financial "sharks" who were using England's increasing trade and colonial expansion to fatten their own bank-accounts. We find the same people satirized in Dickens' novels: for example, Mr. Carker, the Manager, in Dombey and Son. These "Buccaneers" would sell stocks in mines that did not exist, as easily as they might have sold stocks in the Australian gold-mines. They were

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known to sell out at double the price for which they had bought, weeks or months before. This was what Belloc referred to as the "foreign policy of cosmopolitan finance."

Neither of the "hermes" was born in England, but of Sin's birthplace little was known except that it was:

Beyond the Cape, beyond the Horn,  
Beyond Fernando Po;  
In some far Isle he saw the light  
But where it lay was never quite  
Indubitably known.

He was a citizen of earth  
A subject of the world.

Again the origin of Sin  
Was doubtful and obscure.

There are two groups of people satirized here: those who, like Socrates believed themselves to be "citizens of the world"; and those who would despise those whose "origin" was doubtful or unknown. Hidden in the lines too, is a Bellocian thrust at the English people who so heartily dislike Catholic doctrine and universality. He accomplishes the latter by using a quotation from Socrates: "I am a citizen of the world." ; and the former by a pun on Original Sin - "the origin of Sin". Universality at a time when England was steeped in imperialism and Protestantism was most unpopular and in the characterization of Sin, Belloc indirectly shows us how narrow-minded and insular the English had become.

Blood, on the other hand was quite different. He had documents to prove his origin:

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He was born in 1853  
 Upon a German ship at sea  
 Just off the Grand Canary.

He knew the exact weather, latitude and longitude, and even  
 'his mother's name." His father mattered little:

I think the Public would much rather  
 Be sure of me than of my father.

Even at a card-game, the two show themselves to be opposites.

Whereas:

Sin, at a single game would lose  
 A little host of I.O.U's,  
 Often took the oath absurd  
 To break the punters or his word.

Blood was the shrewd, careful, cunning Nordic:

A man of iron, cold and hard;  
 He very rarely touched a card,  
 But when he did he cheated.

There we see Blood as the financier, not merely a card-shark.

We are led to believe that in the world of investment there  
 was dealt out many a raw deal and the points were often piled  
 up on the score-sheet of the magnates.

According to the Traveller the characters of the two  
 were most clearly drawn on the battle-field or in their deal-  
 ings with the natives:

In such conditions Sin would burn  
 To plunge into the fray,  
 While Blood would run the whole concern  
 From fifty miles away.

Sin, the impetuous, always ready for anything - especially a  
 fight - is contrasted with the cool, calculating, executive  
 type, who prefers to run his wars from a distance and who

## THE SATIRE

110.

exploits the natives who have been conquered by the sacrifice of others.

The poet was rampant against the Socialists. There are a few lines that foresee (as does his "Servile State") the extent to which Socialism can go overboard when allowed full sway. The Traveller is talking about the power of the "Lord Chief Justice of Liberia". The natives seem to be almost hypnotized by his words. This the Englishman cannot understand at first sight, but then he hears him speak:

And then we clearly understood  
How great a Power for Social Good  
The Africans can be.  
He said with a determined air:  
"You are not what your fathers were;  
Liberians, you are free!  
Of course, If you refuse to go - - - "  
And here he made a gesture.

Those who recall the days before and during World War 11 will quickly see the analogy between the Lord Chief calling on his Afrikanders, and Hitler or Mussolini commandeering their Nazis and Fascists. All were free - to carry out orders! In those lines we see, too, Belloc's sympathy for the Boers. He had been pro-Boer from the beginning of the African affair and his words reek with sarcasm:

"You are not what your fathers were;  
Liberians, you are free! - - -"

And how were the natives brought under Blood's rule? Witness his treatment of the Caravan when they became rebellious:

## THE SATIRE

111.

Blood understood the Native mind  
 He said: "We must be firm but kind."  
 A Mutiny resulted.

After quelling the mutinous advance with "one glance"

He broke the Mutineers.  
 We shot and hanged a few, and then  
 The rest became devoted men.

Several times in the poem reference is made to the making of positions for the Party favourites. The newly-rich came in for their share of the honours too, if they knew the right people. Blood was such a clever, practical financier that his fame had him marked out as a man of the future. The Court, and even the Queen recognized his talents and the poet sarcastically remarks, that he might have become a military man of note - if he had so wished. The lines in the poem are directly aimed at a governmental policy in England which made the buying and selling of honours a quite common practice:

Her gracious Majesty the Queen  
 Would certainly have made him,  
 In spite of his advancing years,  
 A Captain of the Volunteers.  
 A certain person of the Sort  
 That has great influence at Court,  
 Assured him it was so;  
 And said: "It simply lies with you  
 To get this little matter through,  
 You pay a set of trifling fees  
 To me - at any time you please -"

And how were these "little matters" created? For example, commissions were appointed to go to the colonies to collect data on the most trifling things and members of these exploration committees were "great bigwigs from the Continent."

## THE SATIRE

112.

our expedition  
 Came suddenly on a commission,  
 Appointed to determine  
 Whether the thirteenth parallel  
 Ran right across a certain well,  
 Or touched a closely neighbouring tree;  
 And whether elephants should be  
 Exterminated all as "game",  
 Or, what is not at all the same,  
 Destroyed as common vermin.

The poet has used several devices to charge this satire with meaning. When Captain Blood sees the vast marsh before him he is reminded of another man who was made rich in foreign lands. "Lordly Solomon of old" needed gold for his temple just as William needs gold for his prestige and his bank-account. The ancient King went to Ophir, mined the gold and "sailing northward to Perim, took all the gold away with him." The Captain dreams that he too will sail northwards to England carrying with him the riches of Africa. The allusion here to King Solomon strengthens the description of William's greed for gold, power and position.

The thumb-nail sketch of the Lord Chief Justice of Liberia:

Cain Abolition Beecher Boz,  
 Worked like a Nigger - which he was.

evokes a number of historical references. Cain who murdered his brother Abel, is a fitting man for Boz to be named for, as this Lord Chief is murdering (by slave labour) his brothers, the natives, who are under him. Abolition and Beecher, very likely refer to the efforts of Harriet Beecher Stowe to abolish

## THE SATIRE

113.

slave labour in United States. The sweated labour of the negroes in America had become so harsh that the expression "to work like a nigger" has become an almost over-worked simile. The word "Nigger" is capitalized here because it personifies not only men like Boz, who had become colonial pawns being used by the British for their own ends, but all the negroes who were "worked" by their conquerors.

A typical English device for emphasis is understatement and Belloc has made use of it here several times. He speaks of "little England" - now so mighty and powerful; "the little statesman in the bud" - when all statesmen were considered as carrying much weight; "you pay a trifling set of fees" - and it was well known that for court honours one had to pay dearly. The fare of the travellers on the ship is described as "poor" - asparagus, turtle soup, ices and omelettes! Then Sin asks for something better than this "pâté de foie gras". There was an immediate change on the menu the following day and we expect it to be a change for the better

But this fastidious taste  
Succeeded in a startling way;  
At Dinner on the following day  
They gave us Bloater Paste.

When he describes the attack of that "peevish pachyderm" the Rhinoceros, he says it is probably just the creature's "play".

But people who have heard it say  
That when he prods you with his horn  
You wish you never had been born.

Amusing is the "let-down" to the reader when you hear the

## THE SATIRE

114.

result of the "endless torture" of the Traveller. He has been tried by almost every conceivable method of African punishment. Finally they hang him upside down. This, you think, is going to be the end. But not so; no death for him!

Till (if it's not too coarse to state)  
There happened what I simply hate,  
My nose began to bleed.

The element of contrast has been used to advantage. The fact that we view the "heroes" side by side, helps us to visualize more clearly each of them.

Sin loved the bottle, William gold,  
'Twas Blood that bought, and Sin that sold.

Blood had his dreams, but Sin was mad,  
While Sin was foolish, Blood was bad.

Several similes have been employed well: "And how, like Englishmen, we died" - the typical pride of the British soldier; "the deep Imperial emotion that moves us like a martial strain" - the characteristic feeling of the Empire-Builders of the Victorian era. In describing Blood's hunger for the gold he hoped to mine out of the "Mud", the poet says that he "seemed like one possessed or haunted" as he stood over the "vast swamp".

Bitter sarcasm is employed in the description of Blood's "expansion" plan. Here we see this man, a scoundrel and a trickster, having his "dreams" described with words now symbolic of the Imperialist policy:

Imagine how the Mighty Scheme,  
The Goal, the Vision and the Dream

Developed in his hands,

## THE SATIRE

115.

The hyperbole has been used in several places with excellent effect. In describing the sea-serpent which the ship encountered, the "explorers" (who had never "explored" before) said that:

In length (as far as we could guess  
A quarter of a mile or less.  
And in its mouth a whale.)

When the Traveller tells the reporter he has "a few remarks - a very few - " he follows this with twelve hundred lines. Merely nothing, of course, when compared with the importance of the trip! Commander Sin is well received by the President of Ecuador, who is so pleased with his conquest that he

Embraced him twenty times or more  
And gave him stripes and things galore,  
Crosses and medals by the score.

Blood's elegance was so noteworthy that he was sought for by everyone. Sin was no "Club" man. He was expelled from every one but Blood "belonged to ninety-four."

Here and there are good bits of description. The effect of the long slow march over the African plains is well described in the line "the march proceeded mile on mile, monotonous and lonely." Alliteration and metre are combined to produce the feeling experienced by the men plodding wearily over barren lands. "An admirable ambushade" gives us a cleverly humorous picture of the three men hiding behind a knoll, waiting for the native king to pass. "Supposed to show strategical ability" is not only a good alliteration but a

## THE SATIRE

116.

parody on the Gilbert and Sullivan music-lyric combination.

In a number of places the "Modern Traveller" sounds a trifle Kiplingesque. There is the "East is East and West is West" theme in the lines:

Due west retired the foreign fleet,  
But Sin he steered due east;  
He muttered, "They shall never meet."

And we have a spark of the native dialect which Kipling introduced so often:

In dealing wid de Native Scum,  
Yo' cannot pick an' choose;  
Yo' hab to promise um a sum  
Ob wages paid in Cloth and Rum.  
But, Lordy! That's a ruse!  
Yo' get yo' well on de Adventure,  
And change de wages to Indenture.

After reading the "Modern Traveller" we realize that it is not "nonsense verse" as such. It is humorous and the illustrations assist in making the laughter. However, when we read between the lines and behind the comedy, we see that it is a picture - and not a very flattering one - of many of the abuses in the Imperial platform of England at the end of the nineteenth century. As far as its influence is concerned we cannot be sure that it was too far-reaching at the time of writing when Imperial attainments were at their height. Furthermore pro-Boerism was not the style in the England of the '90's. Socialism was just in its embryonic state and as yet no one understood it, with the obvious result that no one feared it. It has taken posterity to see that Belloc was right

## THE SATIRE

117.

on many points. As satire, the "Modern Traveller" is a clever, witty exposition of the state into which England had fallen and uses the speaker, the typical Englishman, as the mouth-piece.

"Peers and More Peers" is another illustrated edition which appeared in June 1911. It is a political satire and its character description is written in words which evoke the "gargantuan exodus" with which Belloc boasted he had gone out of Parliament six months before, "blowing a huge trumpet and banging the door behind." Belloc had no love for many of the gentlemen who had sat with him from 1904 to 1911. On the other hand the member from South Salford did not increase his popularity when he began to press for the reform of the House of Lords, to campaign against secrecy in the affairs of public life and to vote against the Education Bill of 1908, which

from the Catholic point of view had the advantage of presupposing a national system of religion and morals. <sup>12</sup>

One must be familiar with the social and political background of England at this time to really appreciate the humour in "Peers". The poems are strictly satire and every thought and idea, each word and expression, is aimed at the party politics of the era. But even though we can distinguish personalities, it is quite plain that Belloc is critical of a group.

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12. Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, p.224.

## THE SATIRE

118.

"Lord Roehampton" obviously refers to the difficulties encountered by the Budget of 1909. Roehampton could be Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman who resigned in April 1908 and who died before the end of the month.

During a late election Lord  
Roehampton stained a vocal chord  
From shouting, very loud and high,  
To lots and lots of people why  
The Budget in his own opin-  
-ion should not be allowed to win. 13

The Specialist's diagnosis was to the effect that:

You have a swelling in the head;  
Your Larynx is a thought relaxed  
And you are greatly over-taxed. 13

The double meaning in "over-taxed" is clever, as the 1908 Budget aimed at the taxing of unearned increment of land, sale or lease of land, or its transfer after death. This was the greatest attack on the bill: that its purpose was, under the guise of taxation to legislate against one class in the interest of another. So says the Lord, in hoarse excitement:

I am indeed! On every side!

The professional men receive their share of criticism. Doctors apparently come in to see their patient, look at him, put him to bed where he must stay

till Wednesday week,  
When I will come to set you free  
(If you are cured) and take my fee.

The fee was a most important part of the medical venture as is

## THE SATIRE

119.

shown when the doctor has a Lord for a patient. He will be a paying customer so,

On Wednesday week the Doctor hires  
A Brand-new Car with Brand-new Tyres  
And Brand-new Chauffeur all complete  
For visiting South Audley Street.

But the Butler has bad news for him:

Oh! Sir! - - Prepare to hear the worst!  
Last night my kind old master burst.  
And what is more, I doubt if he  
Has left enough to pay your fee.  
The Budget - - -

This is enough for the doctor. There is no more charity; no more humanitarian interest; no more professional decorum.

With a dreadful oath,  
The Specialist, denouncing both  
The Budget and the House of Lords,  
Buzzed angrily Bayswaterwards.

And ever since, as I am told  
Gets it beforehand; and in gold.

By the use of effective verbs: "floats", "perambulate" and "wades"; by irony in the negatives: "No Union Jack floats on the stables" and "No Toffs perambulate the Gay Parterre"; and even by humour in the foot-note to one of his lines

This is the first and only time  
That I have used this sort of Rhyme.

(The rhyme "Straw" with "door"), we get a picture of a lordly mansion at a time of death. Naturally we readily form a striking contrast with the house at ordinary times - the comparison not being a happy one, for it shows the spirit of frivolity ordinarily surrounding the homes of the well-to-do.

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The repetition and the capitalization in the description of the doctor's "newly-rich" state reminds one of the rise of the professional classes at this time and the poet's disgust at the

Brand-new Car with Brand-new Tyres  
And Brand-new Chauffeur all complete.

Cars were not in general use at this time and were considered a luxury. Those who came into sudden fortune made sure to secure all those objects which marked them out as having risen in status. The same type of thing is satirized in

Lord Heygate had a troubled face  
His furniture was commonplace - -  
The sort of Peer who well might pass  
For someone of the middle class. <sup>14</sup>

The famous "Lord Finchley" epigram shows the peerage with little money yet still trying hard to maintain their social status.

Lord Finchley tried to mend the Electric Light  
Himself. It struck him dead; and serve him right!  
It is the business of the wealthy man  
To give employment to the artisan. <sup>15</sup>

And in order to keep up to the standards of the titled, the Lords engaged in all sorts of money-making schemes like poor "Lord Hippo" who lost all his allowance on a horse-race, begged from his father and then bet again!

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14. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 210  
15. ibid. page 210.

## THE SATIRE

121.

Lord Hippo, feeling deeply - - well,  
 More grateful than he cared to tell - -  
 Punted the lot on Little Nell: -  
 And got a telegram at dinner  
 To say that he had backed the winner. 16

It is quite likely that "Lord Henry Chase" is Cecil Chesterton who was sued for libel after writing the Party System in conjunction with Belloc. There was much publicity over it but finally Chesterton was freed.

What happened to Lord Henry Chase?  
 He got into a Libel Case!  
 The Daily Howl had said that he -  
 But could not prove it perfectly  
 To Judge or Jury's satisfaction:  
 His Lordship, therefore, won the action  
 But, as the damages were small  
 He gave them to a Hospital. 17

Lord Uncle Tom, named for the Tom of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," is a satire on the British attitude toward the negroes in Africa. In 1908 the self-governing Union of South Africa came into being. The general feeling was that people so lately at war with England were not ready for such a step. Belloc makes fun of their attitude:

Lord Uncle Tom was different from  
 What other nobles are.  
 For they are yellow or pink, I think,  
 But he was black as tar.

He often mingled in debate  
 And latterly displayed  
 Evidences of peculiar weight  
 Upon the cocoa-trade. 18

16. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 211

17. ibid., page 209

18. ibid., page 212-13

## THE SATIRE

122.

Belloc often employs a capitalized noun to personify a whole class of people, thus adding emphasis: "The Rich arrived in pairs"; "The Poor arrived in Fords" and "The People in Between". The same sort of thing is in the "Happy Journalist":

As - Mr. Howl demanding blood,  
And Lord Retender stealing stamps,  
And Mr. Bing instructing liars,  
His elder son composing trash;  
Beaufort (whose real name is Meyers)  
Refusing anything but cash. 19

Notice the condensation of words in the above few lines. The verbs are particularly good and help us to visualize the man behind the action. This word economy is one of the chief characteristics of his satire style.

The conversational atmosphere, the exclamations, questions, pauses, direct questions and personal asides, throughout the satire gives vitality to the verse. We find examples of all these in the "Newdigate Poem", taken from the delightful satire on dons and colleges, "Lambkin's Remains".

The sub-title of the poem indicates that it is:

A prize poem submitted by Mr. Lambkin, then scholar and later fellow of Burford College, to the examiners of the University of Oxford on the prescribed poetic theme set by them in 1893, "The Benefits of the Electric Light." 20

The poem opens with the address to the Muse: "Hail, Happy Muse, and touch the tuneful strings!" And throughout, we

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19. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 152.

20. ibid. page 155.

## THE SATIRE

123.

have such apostrophes as: "Awake, my Muse"; "Oh, Heartless Jove! Oh, Adamantine Fate!"; "Arouse thee, Muse!" and "Aroint thee, Muse! Inspired the poet sings!"

The questions here and there are rhetorical as Lambkin is addressing an audience. But they add reality for we are able to read in the manner he speaks.

Clip the dear wings of Buoyant Pegasus? and

Shall pure statistics jar upon the ear  
That pants for Lyric accents loud and clear? and

Shall I describe the complex Dynamo  
Or write about its Commutator? N O !

The conversational use of the dash and pause make us picture the excitement of the lecturer:

A random touch--a hand's imprudent slip--  
The Terminals--a flash--a sound like "Zip!"  
A smell of burning fills the started Air--  
The Electrician is no longer there!

Mr. Lambkin waxes eloquent in his conclusion and the whole is a tremendous satire on the power and might accumulated by the Imperialists.

Hail, Britain, Mistress of the Azure Main,  
Ten thousand Fleets sweep over thee in vain!  
Hail Mighty Mother of the Brave and Free,  
That beat Napoleon and gave birth to me!  
Thou that canst wrap in thine emblazoned robe  
One quarter of the habitable globe.  
Thy mountains, wafted by a favouring breeze,  
Like mighty rocks withstand the stormy seas.  
Thou art a Christian Commonwealth, and yet  
Be thou not all unthankful - nor forget  
As thou exultest in Imperial Might  
The Benefits of the Electric Light.

We notice particularly the irony in "Thou art a Christian

## THE SATIRE

124.

Commonwealth" and "Thou that canst wrap -- one quarter of the habitable globe." The first three lines are parodies on the surge of "imperial" poetry that came out during and after the Boer War.

"Lines to a Don" (1910) is a masterpiece of satire and the puzzle has always been, "Who was the Don?" As far as we can find there seems to be no definite answer to this in any of the sources to Belloc's private life. However, we would think the Chesterton to be "Cecil" as he and Belloc were working together most intimately at this time on political matters. And who was the Don? It may have been C.F.G. Masterman a liberal of independent views, and former tutor in English at Christ's College, Cambridge. Masterman and Belloc had been quite good friends but when the former changed face and voted in 1909 against the "Right to Work Bill" that he had supported in 1908, Belloc, supported by Chesterton attacked him furiously. Masterman retaliated against Chesterton, and Belloc replied with "Lines to a Don". (In combination Chesterton and Belloc had answered Masterman in "The Party System") This theory, of course, assumes that Masterman is the "Don".

## LINES TO A DON

Remote and ineffectual Don  
 That dared attack my Chesterton,  
 With that poor weapon, half-impelled,  
 Unlearnt, unsteady, hardly held,  
 Unworthy for a tilt with men -  
 Your quavering and corroded pen:  
 Don poor at Bed and worse at Table,

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Don pinched, Don starved, Don miserable;  
 Don stuttering, Don with roving eyes,  
 Don nervous, Don of crudities;  
 Don clerical, Don ordinary,  
 Don self-absorbed and solitary;  
 Don here-and-there, Don epileptic;  
 Don puffed and empty, Don dyspeptic;  
 Don middle-class, Don sycophantic,  
 Don dull, Don brutish, Don pedantic;  
 Don hypocritical, Don bad,  
 Don furtive, Don three-quarters mad;  
 Don (since a man must make an end),  
 Don that shall never be my friend.

.....

Don different from those regal Dons!  
 With hearts of gold and lungs of bronze,  
 Who shout and bang and roar and bawl  
 The Absolute across the hall,  
 Or sail in amply billowing gown  
 Enormous through the Sacred Town,  
 Bearing from College to their homes,  
 Deep cargoes of gigantic tomes;  
 Dons admirable! Dons of .Might.!!  
 Uprising on my inward sight  
 Compact of ancient tales and port  
 And sleep - and learning of a sort.  
 Dons English, worthy of the land;  
 Dons rooted; Dons that understand.  
 Good Dons perpetual that remain  
 A landmark, walling in the plain -  
 The horizon of my memories -  
 Like large and comfortable trees.

.....

Don very much apart from these,  
 Thou scapegoat Don, thou Don devoted,  
 Don to thine own damnation quoted,  
 Perplexed to find thy trivial name  
 Reared in my verse to lasting shame.  
 Don dreadful, rasping Don and wearing,  
 Repulsive Don - Don past all bearing.  
 Don of the cold and doubtful breath,  
 Don despicable, Don of death;  
 Don nasty, skinny, silent, level;  
 Don evil; Don that serves the devil.  
 Don ugly - that makes fifty lines.

## THE SATIRE

126.

There is a canon which confines  
 A Rhymed Octosyllabic Curse  
 If written in Iambic Verse  
 To fifty lines. I never cut;  
 I far prefer to end it - but  
 Believe me I shall soon return,  
 My fires are banked, but still they burn  
 To write some more about the Don  
 That dared attacked my Chesterton. 21

The thought in this poem is of lesser importance than the tone and the style. What the poet says can be expressed in a very few words. A certain Don has attacked, by his writings, Belloc's friend Chesterton. And any Don who would do such a thing is not the truly educated type of Professor that the poet would like to remember. The poem ends with a threat - that the battle is not over and the recipient of this "blast" will hear more in the near future: "Believe me I shall soon return."

At first we feel that this is just a game of name-calling and can be easily dismissed with the excuse that the writer is "letting off steam" after boiling anger. However when we read the poem several times, preferably aloud, we can see that the words are aptly chosen and the sound of them adds to the vituperative effect. Notice how the Don's ability to write is described:

With that poor weapon, half-impelled,  
 Unlearnt, unsteady, hardly held,  
 Unworthy for a tilt with men -  
 Your quavering and corroded pen.

---

21. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, Page 153.

## THE SATIRE

127.

The prefix "un-" and the long pause after "men" shows the scorn with which the poet looks upon this Don. The words "quavering" and "corroded" actually draw us a picture of the pen - and the writer!

In the description of the man himself we get a line-up all the things Belloc finds most detestable, not only in this individual but in society in general: The aspiring-to-honours middle-class, the pedants, the hypocrites, the Dons - self-assured, easy-going and "regal" (see the irony here) - and the political scape-goats. The effect of this intense dislike is brought out by the "sputtering" of all the "t" sounds. In over half of the adjectives used we find them - sycophantic, critical, hypocritical, epileptic, dyspeptic and so on. In these too, we see that return to Gilbert and Sullivan which has been mentioned before.

When the poet runs out of vices to enumerate he makes a comparison in the second section of the poem. He gives the impression that he means "If only you could be like one of these." But all the time we know that the whole eighteen lines are ironical. Belloc had little use for any dons for he always felt that Oxford had cheated him out of a professorship. Not only was he using this poem as a medium to attack his enemy but much more (and we see this now, when we realize that we aren't too sure who this Don is) to attack the whole system of College Education in England.

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The last few lines show a bit of nonsense and humour. He reaches the fiftieth line and announces that he must stop, according to the rule for "rhymed octosyllabic verse". But in the nine lines that follow he makes sure to let the reader know that there is to be a sequel - the "to be continued" idea!

It is for this type of thing that Belloc has been severely criticized. These long harangues, endless strings of words and cutting phrases become tiring and one can stand them only in moderation. On the other hand we must consider too, that it isn't anyone at all who would have the clever wit to produce the effect that Belloc has. When we read this type of verse aloud we can get the expression, the tone of voice and perhaps even the movements of the head and the face as we in our turn, say our "Lines to a Don."

As Belloc is noted for his satire on teetotalers, we would note in passing that his verse of this type was written with a definite purpose in mind - to give the picture of the average Catholic of the time. In Victorian England and for many years previous, the Catholics, greatly in the minority had been looked upon not only with distaste but with a certain amount of suspicion. The English people associated the descendants of Tyborne, with silent retirement to their cottages, where they perhaps wasted away amid their practices of superstition. Belloc was militant against this, as also

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against the general dislike for Catholic tradition and culture. He was out to give a different view. He felt that Catholics had nothing to hide, they were human beings and that they had a right to live. Unfortunately the satiric poetry on this campaign came to be associated with Belloc's dislike for those who would pass the Licencing Act! And so we get verses like:

Where'er a Catholic sun doth shine  
There is always laughter and good red wine.  
At least I have always found it so,  
Benedicamus Domino. 22

And also from "Heretics All."

But Catholic men that live upon wine  
Are deep in the water and frank and fine;  
Wherever I travel I find it so,  
Benedicamus Domino. 23

In the poem "The Example" we find Belloc lamenting the lack of "joie de vivre" in the unbelievers:

John Henderson, an unbeliever  
Had lately lost his joie de vivre  
From reading far too many books  
He went around with gloomy looks. 24

There is the picture of the "Nordic Man" again. However his sister Mary was too much the opposite:

Though unbelieving as a beast  
She didn't worry in the least.  
But drank as hard as she was able,  
And sang and danced upon the table.

The Christians tried to point out to each their separate faults:

The Christians, a declining band,

22. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page

23. ibid. page 55

24. ibid. page 226.

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Would point with monitory hand  
To Henderson his desperation,  
To Mary Lunn, her dissipation.

In the end both died very suddenly - and unexpectedly. Moral?

The moral is (it is indeed)  
You musn't monkey with the Creed.

As has been discussed in the Chapter on the Ballades, Belloc has seventeen of this type of satirical poem. There he satirized the publishers, the heretics, the immorality of the cities, strikers, the selling of privileges and so on. His envoi for the one on the "title" scandal says:

Prince, Orders might as well be made of tin  
Yet will the Bosses waddle on their knees,  
Fat rogues and old, such ornaments to win;  
But what have I to do with all of these? <sup>25</sup>

This denunciation is typical of all the verse of this form.

It is very out-spoken and often too crude for the poet to make his point without the reader's becoming annoyed with the tone of his "voice". We can say "voice" because Belloc is more vociferous in his writings than most men are in their speaking. If only he had had a bit more social grace, how many he might have won to the Faith!

It has been said that the satire was chiselled into perfection in the epigrams. Belloc has an essay "On Epigrams" in the collection "Conversation With An Angel". In this essay

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25. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 143,  
quoted from "Ballade of Complete Detachment".

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he describes what he believes a true epigram to be.

The epigram is verse that tests the writer.  
He must pull it iff altogether, or not at  
all. Of the epigram in verse you can say:  
"This is final. This is it." 26

And he quotes an example of this, an epigram against the

Divines:

Tried to learn polite behaviour  
By reading books against their Saviour.

He says that there the bull's eye has been hit as also in:

He would often flush with terror, where  
another would have paled;  
And he tried to do his duty - but how  
damnably he failed.

and in:

Godolphin says he does not wish to swell  
The Roll of Fame: and it is just as well.

Belloc gives as a parting characteristic of the epigram: "God  
delights in brevity and be terse.

From the Anthology we have an epigram on "modern"  
medicine - Belloc was particularly violent against the onset  
of medical science at the turn of the century.

Of old when folks lay sick and sorely tried  
The doctor gave them physic and they died.  
But here's a happier age: For now we know  
Both how to make men sick and keep them so. 27

And on Politicians:

Here richly with ridiculous display,  
The politician's corpse was laid away.

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26. Belloc, Hilaire, *Conversation With An Angel*, page 70.

27. ~~The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch~~, page page 112.

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132.

While all of his acquaintance sneered and slanged  
I wept: for I had hoped to see him hanged. <sup>28</sup>

In this latter one there is the element of surprise which Belloc often uses in his satire. We find it too in:

The accursed power which stands on Privilege  
(And goes with Women, and Champagne and Bridge)  
Broke and Democracy resumed her reign:  
(Which goes with Bridge, and Women and Champagne. <sup>29</sup>

which is another gibe at the party system in England - members from each party working for the other when the outcome was to their mutual advantage, or when the privileged class was to make a gain.

In the satire Belloc has directed his arrows straight at his foes. The effect is not always pleasant and the reaction has not been one of popular appeal but he has succeeded in doing what he set out to do and this is one of the important requirements of good verse. Unfortunately much of the satire loses its point for the modern reader without a background of the social conditions existant in Belloc's day. Once we can place the people, the situations, the places and the time, the verse assumes new force and Belloc becomes the clever and witty satirist of the English literary scene.

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28. The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Nonesuch, page 114.  
29. ibid. page 115.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## AVE NEQUE VALE

In the introduction to this work it was stated that Belloc hoped, if for nothing else, for the immortality of his verse. By a study of the different forms he used it has been seen that Belloc makes up in quality what he lacks in quantity. And is this not to choose the "better part"? The choice of poems for analysis has not always been easy, for choice immediately presupposes a personal opinion and usually does not lend itself to an objective view. Many poems have been omitted that others might feel would have illustrated the points to better advantage. It is likewise an impossibility to use the Collected Verse of Hilaire Belloc in its entirety.

Sufficient then that the poetry studied has demonstrated the characteristics and techniques of the poet: the superb craftsmanship of the sonnets with their adherence to Greek form and Shakespearean ideal, their deep emotion and their creation "made and made slowly"; the rollicking gaiety of the songs with their merry chuckle or nostalgic longing, their delightful rhythm and the spontaneous bursts of some type of love through them all; the child poetry which is sense and not nonsense; and finally the satire wherein we see the poet's wisdom behind the wit.

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We have seen, too, what might be termed its demerits: his Rabelaisian loves of great jumbles of words; his elongated strings of adjectives, nouns and verbs; his almost gargantuan bombast, at times; his sometimes tactful and hurtful remark which would have been more effective with a little more understanding of human nature.

For years, in fact for nearly all his life, Belloc had wanted to devote his time to verse, and especially to six poems of considerable scale: "The Ode to the West Wind", "The Dream of Charlemagne", "The Renewal", "The Dream of the Conscript of '93", "The Battle of Val-ès-Dunes" and "The Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine". Of these he completed only the last two and toyed with the composition of the "Ode to the West Wind."

Notes on the last poem appear in the official biography<sup>1</sup> and also in the essay "On Coming to an End."<sup>2</sup> We find in this essay one of the recurrent themes in Belloc's writings - his constant preoccupation with life, death and immortality. It would not have surprising if Belloc had written a great ode, for then these deep emotions could have risen to great heights. Belloc goes to the poets for consolation:

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1. Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, London, Hollis and Carter, 1957, pages 263-4-5.

2. Belloc, Hilaire, Stories, Essays and Poems, intro. by A.G. Macdonell, Everyman's Library, # 948, London: Dent, 1950, from "On Coming to an End", page 73-6.

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135.

Those who solace mankind and are the principal benefactors of it, I mean the poets and the musicians, have attempted always to ease the prospect of Coming to an End, whether it were the Coming to an End of the things we love or of that daily habit and conversation which is our life and is the atmosphere wherein we loved them. <sup>3</sup>

He mentions two great poets who can "bring us easily and grandly to the gate (of death)", and he begins that verse of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" which tells the poet's desire for death:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy. <sup>4</sup>

Keats shows here the blessed sweetness of death, and how easy it is, amid the songs of the nightingale, "to cease upon the midnight with no pain." Ronsard shows like sentiments - that death is a release from sorrow and pain:

Je te salue, heureuse et profitable Mort,  
 Des extrêmes douleurs médecin et confort!  
 Quand mon heure viendra, déesse, je te prie,  
 Ne me laisse longtemps languir en maladie. <sup>5</sup>

In the examples given in the essay, we realize the yearning of

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3. Belloc, Hilaire, Stories, Essays and Poems, quoted from "On Coming to an End", page 74.

4. Keats, John, Odes, Lyrics and Sonnets, ed. M.R. Hills, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1916, page 43.

5. Oeuvres Choisies de P. de Ronsard, par Eugène Voizard, Paris, Garnier Frères, 1890, page 340.

the author to write a like poem wherein he might assist others in their anguish of suffering or in the hour of death. He says:

The noblest or the most perfect of English elegies leave, as a sort of savour after the reading of it, no terror at all nor even too much regret, but the landscape of England at evening when the smoke of the cottages mix with autumn vapours among the elms; and even that gloomy modern "Ode to the West Wind", unfinished and touched with despair, though it will speak of

"that outer place forlorn  
Which, like an infinite grey sea, surrounds  
With everlasting calm the land of human sounds;"

yet also returns to the sacramental earth of one's childhood where it says:

"For now the Night completed tells her tale  
Of rest and dissolution; gathering around  
Her mist in such persuasion that the ground  
Of Home consents to falter and grow pale.  
And the stars are put out and the trees fail.  
Nor anything remains but that which drones  
Enormous through the dark....."

and again in another place where it prays that one may at the last be fed with beauty

" as the flowers are fed  
That fill their falling-time with generous breath:  
Let me attain a natural end of death,  
And on the mighty breast, as on a bed,  
Lay decently at last a drowsy head,  
Content to lapse in somnolence and fade,  
In dreaming once again the dream of all things made." 6

The sentiments here are not at all like Belloc. That something be left unfinished does not square with his ability to carry his endeavours to their logical conclusion. That his

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6. Belloc, Hilaire, Stories, Essays and Poems, in "On Coming to an End.", page 74-5.

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poetry should have a note of despair unconquered by his faith, does not ring true. We would expect to find the triumphant note of Shelley in his ode of the same name:

O wind,  
If winter comes, can spring be far behind? <sup>7</sup>

and instead we read:

Nor anything remains but that which drones  
Enormous through the dark.....

He seems to be clutching at something - anything - so that at the end he will have that happiness of knowing that Heaven is within reach, and Death is "heureuse et profitable". He prays that he may be content in his last moments to sleep on the breast of Death and dream of the beauty of all that has been created.

Speaight wonders why the poem was never completed, and suggests as the first reason that Belloc was too busy to write poetry. He gives two marginal notes on the original manuscript to support this claim:

"Belloc, old boy, this has got to be finished."  
and "That's all right, but you must jog the  
muse." <sup>8</sup>

This sounds more like the poet who wanted perfection, who worked at his choice of words and who called poetry "lightning" and good verse "a strong lamp." <sup>9</sup> Certainly the vagueness of

7. British Poetry and Prose, Leider, page 178.

8. Speaight, Robert, Life of Hilaire Belloc, page 265.

9. Belloc, Hilaire, Short Talks With the Dead, in "Talking of Bad Verse", London, Cyme Press, 1926, page 136 .

the lines

that outer place forlorn  
Which, like an infinite grey sea, surrounds  
With everlasting calm the land of human sounds.

does not sound like the certainty of the sonnets or the "Heroic Poem." Granted that "everlasting calm" mitigates to some extent the despair of extinguished stars, falling trees and the enormous drone of the wind through the dark, yet there doesn't seem to be a note of Christian hope anywhere. Surely this is not typical of him who addressed "House of the Resurrection!" ! This would appear to be the greatest reason for Belloc's difficulty in completing the poem. Speaight says:

Belloc may well have scrupled to complete and publish a poem which was more consonant with his temperament than his beliefs. <sup>10</sup>

We might also conjecture that scruples hadn't too much to do with the matter. Belloc's faith was so much a part of him that he could hardly expect the poetic Muse to cooperate with formidable despair. However he did finish two stanzas, the first and the third. These have been reconstructed from fragments surviving among his papers and are quoted in the official biography.

1.

From what known hills, in what remembered skies  
Or what familiar, following seas  
Or in what bowls of morning did you rise  
West wind of the contented? That to these  
Dull shores lethargic an appalling Breeze

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10. Speaight, Robert, Life of Hilaire Belloc, p. 265.

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139.

Quick with the remembrance and the power  
To stir the unburied dead you wake the accomplished hour.

Why will you vex me? I have paid the debt,  
Which all to the inexorable pay;  
The mortal's dues of numbness and decay  
That do enfranchise from this olivet  
Of purposeless but passionate regret  
For those deep hills and that strong youth of mine  
When I was raised in light and kissed of lips divine. 11

It is interesting to compare this "Ode" with the one by Shelley. Belloc questions the west wind, asking it to tell its origin. Notice that the poet expects this point of beginning to be in some "known hills", or "remembered skies" or "familiar seas". The calm question indicates the steady, peaceful man. Shelley addresses the west wind with an exclamation, calls it "wild West Wind", knows that it comes like some "unseen presence" driving the "pestilence-stricken multitudes" before it. The speaker is tremendously moved by the power of the driving wind which he calls "Wild Spirit" and "dirge of the dying year". Belloc's alliteration "familiar, following" is good as a description of the seas, but is even better when considered as an example of onomatopoeia. The sea flows gently and almost undisturbed by the "west wind of the contented." In the metaphor "bowls of morning", he pictures the wind rising with the day from behind the horizon, as if morning, like a chemist, was mixing the elements in order to form the gas which is the west wind.

11. Speaight, Robert, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, page 264-5.

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west wind.

Shelley goes on to describe the tempest following on the heels of the "fierce Maenad":

Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,  
Loosed clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of heaven and ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning. 12

For Shelley the effect of the wind is on nature. For Belloc the effect is on man. This "appalling breeze" has finally succeeded in breaking through the familiar seas of routine and has rudely disturbed the long-stagnated minds of the "unburied dead" - men who should be enthusiastic but have lost the desire to move others. The poet's use of the word "quick" is excellent. It is the first time he has made use of a hard consonant, and it gives the impression of the wind finally breaking through after a struggle with the "lethargic shores".

The third stanza shows us a picture of the distress and disgust the poet feels at his lot. Once more he opens with a question to the west wind. And this time it is in direct contrast to the first. He reprimands the wind for disturbing his peace. After all he has paid his debt to society, which is to become numb and finally to "decay" in the struggle to set oneself free from suffering in this world. And all the while he spends himself in useless, but none the less keen regret, wishing for his youth when he was more or less walking on a

12. Shelley, P.B., "Ode to the West Wind", Leider, p.177

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cloud and raised aloft by the sacred lips of inspiration. Here we have the Belloc with whom we are not acquainted. He does regret not having written great poetry but we have never found him without a solution - if not in his heart, at least on his lips. The strong words he uses to describe his feelings make the emotion more poignant: "inexorable", "numbness and decay", "enfranchise from this olivet". The use of contrast between the state described in the first five lines with that in the last two and so lends weight to the present despondency of the poet.

If this was to have been the tone of the entire poem - and it was likely to be so as the poet seems to have been in the depths of despair - we can well see why his inner self fought against the completion of it. Apparently when he did regret "those deep hills and that strong youth" he was not able to pray, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." Shelley was able to identify himself with nature and assure his mind that after the winter there will be spring. Belloc could only be truly satisfied with a supernatural solution, and from what we have of his ode we can see that this inspiration did not come.

Judging by the imagery, the contrasts, the splendid use of words, as well as the intense emotional surge present in the few lines and stanzas that we have, "The Ode to the West Wind" could have been a great poem. Now its greatness

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lies in the fact that it was the incentive for Belloc to work harder at his "Heroic Poem, In Praise of Wine", which is considered to be his pièce de résistance.

Five years before the completion of the "Heroic Poem" Belloc had published a book of essays "Short Talks With The Dead", one of which "The Good Poet and the Bad Poet" introduces us to the "Heroic Poem". Unfortunately the essay is a satire and our taste for the poem would be soured if we read the prose piece first. There again is Belloc's hatred for teetotalers (this even appears in one place in the poem) and his intense dislike for London society and its pretended gentility. In the essay the bad poet is Belloc. He represents himself as having fallen in utter exhaustion at the gate of the "good poet's mansion. The good poet is entertaining at dinner and among his guests is a Bishop. The host announces that a poor wretch who claims to be a poet is coming to recite a poem for their amusement. The amusement turns into something like horror when the Bishop finds out that the title is "The Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine." All present are most uncomfortable, most of all the "bad Poet" who coughs all the way through the reading. Furthermore he has only the first, middle, and last of the poem completed and it has taken him four years to accomplish that much. Naturally the elite term it very bad as it lacks gentility. They prefer good sentiments and good verse, so the "good Poet" recites from his book:

## AVE NEQUE VALE

143.

Wine exercise a peculiar charm  
But taken in excess does grievous harm.

He then reverently kissed the page  
and replaced the volume on the shelf. 13

In those few lines the sarcasm is fairly dripping. To think that the intelligentsia present in that circle called this poetry excellent enough to "reverently kiss the page", just because the thought is in line with their way of thinking, and to dismiss the "Heroic Poem" as trash! Even a teetotaler would have to admit the excellence of the poetry in the "bad poet's" composition!

In the essay too, is given the reason for the length of time given to composing the "Heroic Poem." Belloc never tires of reminding himself and others of his difficulty in reaching what he considered perfection.

I have been at it for four years - but alas it is not yet completed, for I fear I am a very slow composer. 13

Farther back than this even, we have what might be called the germ of the "Heroic Poem." In 1904 there were a series of essays on the poetry of the French Renaissance. Among the poets discussed is Clément Marot. His poem "Vineyard Song" receives Belloc's special mention and parts of it

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13. Belloc, Hilaire, Short Talks With The Dead, quotations from the essay "The Good Poet and the Bad Poet", Kensington, Cayme Press, 1926.

## AVE NEQUE VALE

144.

## Chanson XXXII

Changeons propos, c'est trop chanté d'amours,  
 Ce sont clamours, chantons de la serpette:  
 Tous vigneron ont a elle recours,  
 C'est leur secours pour tailler la vignette;  
 O serpilette, O la serpilonnette,  
 La vigolette est par toy mise sus,  
 Dont les bons vins tous les ans son yssus!

Le Dieu Vulcain, forgeron des haults dieux,  
 Forgea aux cieulx la serpe bien taillante  
 De fin acier trempe en bon vin vieulx,  
 Pour tailler mieulx et estre plus vaillante.  
 Bacchus la vante, et dit qu'elle est séante  
 Et convenante à Noé le bon hom  
 Pour en tailler la vigne en la saison.

Bacchus alors chapeau de treille avoit,  
 Et arrivoit pour bénistre la vigne;  
 Avec flascons Silenus le suyvoit,  
 Lequel beuvoit, aussi droict qu'une ligne;  
 Puis il trepigne, et se fait une bigne;  
 Comme une guigne estoit rouge son nez;  
 Beaucoup de gens de sa race sont nez. 14

Wine seems to Belloc to be a symbol for all that he knows, loves and affirms. The deep red draughts are the acceptable beverage of that Europe in which tradition is rooted; the product of the vine calls forth for him Christ and the Holy Eucharist. It is little wonder then that he can describe the above "Chanson" as he does.

All the poem is wine. It catches its rhymes and weaves them out and in, and moves rapid and careless in a fugue, like the march from Asia, when the Panthers went before and drove

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14. Grenier, Abel, ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de Clément Marot*, Tome 1, Paris, Librairie Garnier Frères, 1921, pages 467-8.

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145.

the car. The internal rhythm and pulse is the clapping of hands in barns at evening and the peasants' feet dancing freely on the beaten earth. It is a very good song; it remembers the treading of the grapes and is refreshed by the mists that rise at evening when the labour is done. <sup>15</sup>

Actually in Belloc's poem there are lines which are quite similar to the prose paragraph above.

We might say of the "Heroic Poem", as Belloc said of Marot's that "all the poem is wine." Wine is the main theme throughout and winding in and out as in a fugue are the secondary themes - Bacchus with his chariot bringing the sunshine across the gardens of the world and planting the vineyards as his Panther-team advances; the visit to the regions of hell where the "Water-Drinkers" are enslaved forever; the happiness of those who form the Dionysian ring in honour of Bacchus; the final departure from the "grape-enobling sun" and the culmination of it all in the Christian death of one who can say to his "Comrade-Commander" that he hopes at that last moment He will

...let my youth appear  
Bearing a Chalice, open, golden, wide,  
With benediction graven on its side.

The "Heroic Poem" like Marot's is based on the legends surrounding the god of wine, Bacchus. The poet salutes the

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15. Roughead, W.N., "Hilaire Belloc's Thoughts and Writings" in the Times Literary Supplement, No. 2729, 53rd.yr. May 21, 1954, page 2.

## AVE NEQUE VALE

146.

"Wine" as being the object of his praise, and because he needs the assistance of the Muse, he calls upon Ausonius, a French poet of the fourth century who wrote charming poetry, to help him in the composition. The Ausonian Muse might also refer to Marot whose "Vineyard Song" has inspired him to hail "wine" in poetry. The poet gives his reasons for saluting "wine" in the first two lines:

To exalt, enthrone, establish and defend,  
To welcome home mankind's mysterious friend.

We should note here that the five verbs correspond with the main sections of the poem as a whole. The first four refer to wine as a purely temporal thing; "to welcome home mankind's mysterious friend" leads us to the conclusion that the climax will be triumphantly spiritual. The parallel structure in the next four lines, together with the salute at the beginning lends tremendous force and emphasis:

Wine, true begetter of all arts that be;  
Wine, privilege of the completely free;  
Wine, the recorder; wine the sagely strong;  
Wine, bright avenger of sly-dealing wrong.

The second section of the poem - the expedition of Bacchus across the continents of Europe and Africa - is the longest. The first six lines,

Sing how the Charioteer from Asia came,  
And on his front the little dancing flame  
Which marked the God-head. Sing the Panther-team,  
The gilded Thrysis twirling, and the gleam  
Of cymbals through the darkness. Sing the drums.  
He comes: the young renewer of Hellas comes!

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147.

resemble to no small degree the lines in the "Chanson":

Bacchus alors chapeau de treille avoit,  
Et arrivoit pour benistre la vigne;  
Avec flascons Silenus le suyvoit,  
Lequel beuvoit, aussi droict qu'une ligne.

Under the inspiration of the Muse, the poet tells of the triumphant ride of Bacchus in his chariot drawn by a lion and tiger, accompanied by Pan and Silenus and all the Satyrs. Whereas Marot has only the idea of the legend, Belloc has given us the whole picture. He calls Bacchus the Charioteer of Asia. This ties in nicely with the Bacchus myth, for the wine-god had no fewer than a dozen titles. "The little dancing flame which marked the God-head" refers to the fact that it is said of Bacchus, according to Pliny,<sup>15</sup> that he was the first one who ever wore a crown. "The young renewer of Hellas", called so because he is bringing new life to Thessaly by planting the vines, is accompanied by drums, cymbals and music of all kinds. The caesura in the last line is good for it heightens the emotion produced when this god-hero charges from place to place. Even the choice of words - "dancing flame", "gilded Thrysis", "gleam of cymbals" - add to the sumptuous riches and power of this conqueror.

The next few lines are in direct contrast of tone and

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15. Wright, F.A., Lempriere's Classical Dictionary, new edition, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1949, page 100.

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148.

mood, and then suddenly they are pierced through with the Pageant parade as it passes in triumphal conquest of the land.

The Seas await him. Those Aegean Seas  
 Roll from the dawning, ponderous, ill at ease,  
 In lifts of lead, whose cresting hardly breaks  
 To ghostly foam, when suddenly there awakes  
 A mountain glory inland. All the skies  
 Are luminous; and amid the sea bird cries  
 The mariner hears a morning breeze arise.  
 Then goes the Pageant forward. The sea-way  
 Silvers the feet of that august array  
 Trailing above the waters; through the airs;  
 And as they pass a wind above them bears  
 The quickening word, the influence magical.  
 The Islands have received it, marble-tall  
 The long shores of the mainland. Something fills  
 The warm Euboean combes, the sacred hills  
 Of Aulis and of Argos. Still they move  
 Touching the City walls, the Temple grove,  
 Till, far upon the horizon-glint, a gleam  
 Of light, of trembling light, revealed they seem  
 Turned to a cloud, but to a cloud that shines,  
 And everywhere as they pass, the Vines! the Vines!  
 The Vines, the conquering Vines! And the Vine breathes  
 Her savour through the upland, empty heaths  
 Of treeless wastes; the Vines have come to where  
 The dark Pelasgian steep defends the lair  
 Of the wolf's hiding; to the empty fields  
 By Aufidus, the dry campaign that yields  
 No harvest for the husbandman, but now  
 Shall bear a nobler foison than the plough;  
 To where, festooned along the tall elm trees,  
 Tendrils are mirrored in Tyrrhenian seas;  
 To where the South awaits them; even to where  
 Stark, African, informed of burning air,  
 Upturned to Heaven the broad Hipponian plain  
 Extends luxurious and invites the main.  
 Guelma's a mother: barren Thapsa breeds;  
 And northward in the valleys, next the meads  
 That sleep by misty river banks, the Vines  
 Have struck to spread below the solemn pines.  
 The Vines are on the roof-trees. All the Shrines  
 And homes of men are consecrate with Vines.

The poet has traced with his usual geographical precision the ride of the "Panther-team" across three continents.

Setting out probably from the Asiatic town of Nysa, his birth-place, Bacchus crosses to Thessaly, over the Isles of Greece until he has reached Euboea, the largest of the Aegean islands; then to the sea-coast towns of Aulis and Argos, two miles inland. Athens and Mount Olympus are visited, and then on to the "dark Pelasgian steep", where the poet takes a moment to integrate the history of the place with the geography. The "lair" of the "wolf's hiding" refers to the capture of some Athenian women by the Pelasgi who afterwards murdered them and their children. (This integration of history with travel is what Belloc considered a "must" for travellers). And then to Italy, to the dry east coast and to the Tyrrhenian seas, where they laid plans to proceed to "stark" Africa and the Mediterranean coastal towns of Hippon and Thapsus and the sleepy meadows of the Nile River Valley. Everywhere there is gratitude to that god who has taught the world the cultivation of the Vine. It has become a sacred thing, and Shrines and Homes alike are consecrated with the growth of the Vines in their gardens.

The story is told so well that we find ourselves racing along with the reading. This is typical of all Belloc narratives. His condensation of detail is admirable. He has included nearly all the important facts of the Bacchus myth, and yet the story has not lost anything by his brevity. How has he achieved this? Firstly, by the numerous action words

denoting the power and speed of the "Panther-team" carrying the great god and his retinue: "suddenly there awakes a mountain glory", "there goes the Pageant forward", "the quickening word", "still they move", "everywhere as they pass". Secondly, by the frequent repetition of the words "to where": "to where the dark Pelasgian steep", "To where, festooned", "to where the South awaits them" and "even to where stark, African". Thirdly, by means of the geographical succession of towns and cities already mentioned above.

The personification lends colour to the passage. The "Vines" come to mean crowds of people and hundreds of activities. "The Vines, the Conquering Vines", "The Vines have come" "The Vines are on the roof-trees" and "All the Shrines and Homes of men are consecrate with Vines." How much more effective this is than to say that everywhere Bacchus has visited men have been inspired to come forth with their instruments and plant the vines!

The poet calls Bacchus' arrival "the influence magical". Then he substantiates this by giving examples: "suddenly there awakes a mountain glory inland", "the wind before them bears the quickening word", "something fills the warm Euboean combs" and "revealed they seem turned to a cloud". His use of colour words paints the pictures as he describes them: "lifts of lead", "ghostly foam", "mountain glory", "the sea-way silvers the feet" (also a beautiful use of alliteration), "marble-tall",

"burning air", "misty river banks". He has used personification and the caesura in the line "Guelma's a mother: barren Thapsa breeds." The caesura emphasizes the importance of the two statements. Guelma and Thapsus, being in "stark Africa", are not expected to produce any lush growth. However with the advent of Bacchus all is well and even the "barren" become productive.

One couplet in this section is worthy of special note as it is quoted in Belloc's essay. There we read:

Or where, festooned about the tall elm-trees  
Etrurian grapes regard Tyrrhenian seas. <sup>16</sup>

And in the latest edition of the poetry, the lines are:

To where, festooned along the tall elm-trees,  
Tendrils are mirrored in Tyrrhenian seas.

The polishing which the poet has done here is quite noticeable and shows that he has tried again his "chiselling in marble." The second, "tendrils are mirrored" gives us a much more realistic picture, for it is something we can readily imagine. Also there is some life there - the clear water, the extremely large tendrils, so big that they can be reflected in the sea - all details that are not present in "Etrurian grapes regard". The personification there would not have been dainty enough to balance "festooned along the tall elm-trees" and

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16. Belloc, Hilaire, "The Good Poet and the Bad Poet" an essay from Short Talks With The Dead, Kensington, Cayme Press, 1926.

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the verb "regard" has become a hackneyed colloquialism.

With the growth of the Vines throughout the world,  
the work of the wine-god is done:

And now the task of that triumphant day  
Has reached to victory. In the reddening ray  
With all his train, from hard Iberian lands  
Fulfilled, apparent, that Creator stands  
Halted on Atlas. Far beneath him, far,  
The strength of Ocean darkening and the star  
Beyond all shores. There is a silence made.  
It glorifies: and the gigantic shade  
Of Hercules adores him from the West.  
Dead Lucre: burnt Ambition: Wine is best.

For Bacchus the day has been victorious. Everywhere he has  
conquered the lands of their barrenness as he passed. And now  
the "Creator" stands upon the highest mountain in the world -  
so high that no one could cross it and the heavens rested atop  
of it. Far before him stretches on one side the conquered  
lands and on the other, the mighty Atlantic beyond which was  
a void. Yet in the chasm to the west - unpeopled and unknown-  
the shades of Hercules, long since burnt on Mount Oeta, adore  
the great conqueror in his hour of glory.

The last line with its two caesuras and its three  
personifications is a magnificent one. On One level, "Lucre"  
and "Ambition" stand for Hercules, always seeking for power  
and glory; "Wine" represents Bacchus the god of vintage. On a  
higher level, there may be a political implication - the lucre  
and ambition representing the Nordics with whom the poet  
associated all that he disliked about the English political  
system; wine standing for the Mediterraneans, Rome and

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tradition for whom and for which the English had no affection. Judging by the remainder of the poem, there is a still higher and more personal level. The three stand for Belloc himself. The "Lucre" is the money he has been forced to earn by means of his writing. This to him is a dead thing for he feels that he should have devoted his life to poetry. "Ambition" was that emotion stirring within him as a youth that urged him to seek for immortality by means of his verse. Now he has grown older; the flame of his inspiration has been snuffed out. All that he has left - and it is by far the most important - is his Faith. To him, wine is the symbol of Christ, for it is by means of the substance of bread and wine that Christ comes daily to mankind in the Blessed Eucharist.

Once more the picture of Bacchus the conqueror, is made resplendent by the use of adjectives - "triumphant day", "with all his train", "fulfilled, apparent", "that Creator", and "far beneath him". Furthermore, Hercules, the dead and burnt holocaust, adores Bacchus, the newly-made conqueror. The closing three words, "Wine is best", gives us the hope of Christianity for us, that is missing in "Ode to the West Wind."

It seems unfortunate that the next section had to be a satire. One is inclined to feel that by this time in Belloc's life he had had his fling and he might well have kept the note of sarcasm and invective out of his greatest poem. But in the "Heroic Poem" just as we found in the essay written years

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before, the teetotalers come in for their share of curses.

But what are these that from the outer murk  
 Of dense mephitic vapours creeping lurk  
 To breather foul airs from that corrupted well  
 Which oozes slime along the floor of Hell?  
 These are the palsied brood of sin  
 In whose vile veins, poor, poisonous and thin,  
 Decoctions of embittered hatreds crawl:  
 These are the Water-Drinkers, cursed all!  
 On what gin-sodden Hags, what flaccid sires  
 Bred these white Slugs from what exhaust desires?  
 In what close prison's horror were their wives  
 Watched by what tyrant power with evil smiles;  
 Or in what caverns, blocked from grace and air  
 Received they, then, the mandates of despair?  
 What! Must our race, our tragic race, that roam  
 All exiled from our first, and final, home:  
 That in one moment of temptation lost  
 Our heritage, and now wander, hunger-tost  
 Beyond the Gates (still speaking with our eyes  
 Forever of remembered Paradise),  
 Must we with every gift accepted, still  
 With every joy, receive attendant ill?  
 Must some lewd evil follow all our good  
 And muttering dog our brief beatitude?

At first we are inclined to think that there has been no logical transition between the last section and the one just quoted. However we read of Bacchus that he did go down to hell to recover his mother Semele who was created a goddess by Jupiter. Was it on his trip to hell that the opening question was asked? It could well be the poet's intention to have it so. The long string of adjectival modifiers leading up to "Water-Drinkers" reminds us of that rabelaisian habit of Belloc. These souls are the stricken, palsied brood of sin in whose veins run poor, poisonous and thin blood, carrying in its stream mixtures of all types of hatreds; whose parents were

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"gin-sodden" and "flaccid", and who have received commands to act from some derisive tyrant. And against whom have their jeers and scoffing been directed? "Our race, our tragic race" who have been exiled from their first and final home by the "Water Slugs" which name Belloc applies to the Puritans who ordered wine and Catholics alike out of England. And even now, says the poet after so many years of trial, still our brief periods of happiness are pursued by "attendant ill", "lewd evil" and muttering.

The picture is almost one of persecution complex and is an example of one of those times when the poet would have been more powerful with a good deal more tact and understanding of human nature. If he means here to use the technique of shock, he has succeeded - to too great a degree. Some of the language would be offensive not only to the enemies of the speaker but to his friends. It is harsh invective and such accusations are scarcely becoming in an argument for Rome.

In the next section of the poem the poet goes on to compare the advantages that the lovers of "wine" have over the "Water-Drinkers".

A primal doom, inexorable, wise,  
 Permitted, ordered, even these to rise.  
 Even in the shadow of so bright a Lord  
 Must swarm and propagate the filthy horde  
 Debased, accursed I say, abhorrent and abhorred.  
 Accursed and curse-bestowing. For whoso'er  
 Shall suffer their contagion, everywhere  
 Falls from the estate of man and finds his end  
 To the mere beverage of the beast condemned.

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For such as thee in vain the Rhine has rolled  
 Imperial centuries by hills of gold;  
 For such as thee the flashing Rhone shall rage  
 In vain its lightening through the Hermitage  
 Or level-browed divine Touraine receive  
 The tribute of her vintage at eve.  
 For such as these Burgundian heats in vain  
 Swell the rich slope or load the empurpled plain.  
 Bootless for such as these the mighty task  
 Of bottling God the Father in a flask  
 And leading all Creation down distilled  
 To one small ardent sphere immensely filled.  
 With memories empty, with experience null,  
 With vapid eye-balls meaningless and dull  
 They pass unblest through the unfruitful light;  
 And when we open the bronze doors of Night,  
 When we in high carousel, we, reclined,  
 Spur up to Heaven the still ascending mind,  
 Pass with the all inspiring, to and fro,  
 The torch of genius and the Muse's glow,  
 They, lifeless, stare at vacancy alone  
 Or plan mean traffic, or repeat their moan.  
 We, when repose demands us, welcomed are  
 In young white arms, like our great Exemplar  
 Who, wearied with creation, takes his rest  
 And sinks to sleep on Ariadne's breast.  
 They through the darkness into darkness press  
 Despised, abandoned and companionless.  
 And when the course of either's sleep has run  
 We leap to life like heralds of the sun;  
 We from the couch in roseate mornings gay  
 Salute as equals the exultant day  
 While they, the unworthy, unrewarded, they  
 The dank despisers of the Vine, arise  
 To watch grey dawns and mourn indifferent skies.

In these lines we still witness the poet's anger with  
 those who are wine-despisers but blended in with the anger we  
 see also a ray of gratitude for the blessings possessed by  
 those who are wine-lovers. The evil horde - "filthy, debased,  
 accursed, abhorrent and abhorred" - are permitted by the  
 Almighty to live and propagate their kind; are permitted even  
 to infect the blessed, who as a result find themselves

condemned "to the mere beverage of the beast". There is no doubt for whom the poet means his implications - for such as these "the Rhine has rolled" in vain and in vain the "flashing Rhone shall rage its lightning". Once again the poet has placed the seed of the "filthy horde" among the Nordics. They, he continues, have no experiences, no memories; use their days for nought, and pass their nights moaning or scheming for evil. "Dead Lucre: burnt Ambition"! And then comes the ray of hope for the downtrodden - the ray which is to lead up to the glorious sunset at the conclusion of the poem. The wine-lovers possess the "torch of genius" and the "Muse's glow", the "horde" stare lifeless and vacant into a void; the one has love and companionship and like Bacchus is welcomed in young "white arms", the other is "despised, abandoned and companionless". Even the mornings break differently for each: the first "leap to life like heralds of the sun", and greet the gay rosy morning as equals; the second, "arise to watch grey dawns and mourn indifferent skies."

Again we find parallel structure used effectively to give emphasis: "For such as these in vain...", "For such as these the flashing Rhone...", "For such as these Burgundian..." "Bootless for such as these...". The contrasts are good in that they accentuate the good points of the one side and the bad points of the other: "And we in high carousal...", "They lifeless stare..."; "We, when repose demands us...",

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"they through the darkness..."; "We leap to life like heralds..." they "the unworthy...". The colour words used have the same effect: "The shadow of so bright a Lord"; "hills of gold, flashing Rhine, lightning, empurpled plain" and in contrast "These, the filthy horde" with their "vapid eye-balls". There are several good alliterations mingling sound and colour: "The Rhine has rolled", "The flashing Rhone shall rage" and "load the empurpled plain".

His condensation of thought in the following four lines

Bootless for such as these the mighty task  
Of bottling God the Father in a flask  
And leading all Creation down distilled  
To one small ardent sphere immensely filled.

is most forceful. The poet has great pity for those who get not the spiritual satisfaction of the Consecration. And those who are not of the true faith have not the grace to understand that at the Last Supper and daily on the altar, Christ took bread and wine, which while still retaining its appearance ceased to be bread and wine and became the Body and Blood of Christ. This power Christ passed to the Apostles and the Priests of the True Church who followed after them. As Christ is the second Person of the Trinity and the Trinity includes God the Father, therefore Belloc uses the metaphor "bottling God the Father in a flask." "Leading all Creation down distilled" shows the all-powerful God, Creator of all things, humbling Himself to the degree of making Himself present in His totality in the matter of the Sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist. To

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Belloc, bottled wine evokes the whole doctrine of Transubstantiation and Holy Communion - God's supreme gift to us.

With such great consolation as the Sacraments, says the poet, we can

Forget them! Form the Dionysian ring  
And pulse the ground, and Io, Io, sing.

Father Lenaeon, to whom our strength belongs,  
Our loves, our wars, our laughter and our songs,  
Remember our inheritance, who praise  
Your glory in these last unhappy days  
When beauty sickens and a muddied robe  
Of baseness fouls the universal globe.  
Though all the Gods indignant and their train  
Abandon ruined man, do thou remain!  
By thee the vesture of our life was made,  
The Embattled Gate, the lordly Collonnade,  
The woven fabric's gracious hues, the sound  
Of trumpets, and the quivering fountain-round,  
And, Indestructible, the Arch, and, high  
The Shaft of Stone that stands against the sky,  
And last the guardian-genius of them, Rhyme,  
Come from beyond the world to conquer time:  
All these are thine, Lenaeon.

By thee do seers the inward light discern;  
By thee the statue lives, the gods return;  
By thee the thunder and the falling foam  
Of loud Acquoria's torrent call to Rome;  
Alba rejoices in a thousand springs,  
Gensano sings, and Orvieto sings . . .  
But, Ah! With Orvieto, with that name  
Of dark Etrurian, subterranean flame  
The years dissolve. I am standing in that hour  
Of majesty Septembril, and the power  
Which swells the clusters when the nights are still  
With autumn stars on Orvieto hill.

This section begins with an effective apostrophe, "Forget them!" and let us rejoice by singing and dancing in the "Dionysian ring." Let us praise the god of the Vine and the goddess of the cultivated earth, producer of the vine. Without

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the Vines there would be no Wine, so we must give thanks.

The address to Bacchus is significant - Father Lenaeus. Now, Lenaeus was Bacchus' surname and we could interpret the whole section as being said to the god. However it means more to the sense of the entire poem to consider this as the detail which gives unity to the whole, in that it makes an easy transition between the Bacchanalian triumph - which produces the Wine - and the Priest at the altar who consecrates it.

Father Lenaeus, or Bacchus, is symbolic to Belloc of all Latin civilization whether in mythical or Christian times. In this world is rooted all culture and tradition. Here the Christian Church began. All we have - our inspiration, our conquest, our happiness and our cultural achievements - have come from Rome. These, says the poet, we revere especially at the present time "When beauty sickens and a muddied robe of baseness fouls the universal globe." He refers doubtless, to the "unhappy days" in England and the rest of the world after World War I when strain and suffering, the unsettled state of men's minds and a surge of licentiousness drove out conventionality and had little respect for tradition. Man, therefore is "ruined" except in one way: that Christ remains. And the Christian world of which He is the centre, has produced all that is fine - art, architecture, music and last but not least the "guardian-genius" of all, poetry. These are the inspirations sent by God from Heaven "beyond the world" which will conquer

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time and last for all eternity. Through the power given by God, philosophers search into the reason and nature of things; sculptors produce exquisite statuary; the torrents roar, the springs rejoice; and Orvieto is filled with gaiety and wine. The years dissolve, and suddenly the poet realizes that it is the hour of "Septembral majesty", the time when the harvest of the vines is ready to cut. The nights are still and the stars shine. What could be a more beautiful setting for the harvest of the fruit which will become in time the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Lord.

The poet's use of personification emphasizes the universality of the arts - "The Embattled Gate", "The Arch", "The Shaft of Stone" and "Rhyme". Again he uses parallel structure for emphasis: "By thee do seers...", "By thee the statue...", "By thee the thunder...". The use of the apostrophe after Orvieto, makes us realize the power that name has upon the poet. Just to mention the name, causes him to "come back to earth" as it were and thus fully to realize the effects of the autumn stars and the still nights indicative of the season which will produce the harvest.

Some of the picturesque language makes the ideas almost like an artist's interpretation on canvas: "the power which swells the clusters" - showing the all-powerful and yet unseen magnitude of Him who causes all things to grow and fructify; "Majesty Septembral" - the kingly month under whose

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sway all nature comes to fruition; "loud Acquoria's torrent"- makes us visualize the waters rushing down the mountains and hills; "the quivering fountain-round", "the gracious hues" and the "subterranean flame"- all little daubs of paint on a canvas of poetry.

Now the poem becomes entirely personal. The poet wishes that he had had the beauty of the Mediterranean lands at his finger-tips. Then he too would have produced.

Had these been mine, Ausonian Muse, to know  
 The large contented oxen heaving slow;  
 To count my sheaves at harvest; so to spend  
 Perfected days in peace until the end;  
 With every evening's dust of gold to hear  
 The bells upon the pasture height, the clear  
 Full horn of herdsmen gathering in the kine  
 To ancient byres in hamlets Appenine,  
 And crown abundant age with generous ease:  
 Had these, Ausonian Muse, had these, had these...

But since I would not, since I could not stay  
 Let me remember even in this my day  
 How, when the ephemeral vision's lure is past  
 All, all, must face their Passion at the last.

Was there not one that did to Heaven complain  
 How, driving through the midnight and the rain,  
 He struck, the Atlantic seethe and surge before,  
 To make the lights of home and hear his name no more.  
 Was there not one that from a desperate field  
 Rode with no guerdon but a rifted shield;  
 A name disherited; a broken sword;  
 Wounds unrenowned; battle beneath no Lord;  
 Strong blows, but on the void, and toil without reward.

When from the waste of such long labour done  
 I too must leave the grape-ennobling sun  
 And like the vineyard worker take my way  
 Down the long shadows of declining day,  
 Bend on the sombre plain my clouded sight  
 And leave the mountain to the advancing night,  
 Come to the term of all that was my own

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With nothingness before me, and alone;  
 Then to what hope of answer shall I turn?  
 Comrade-Commander whom I dared not earn,  
 What said you then to trembling friends and few?  
 "A moment, and I drink it with you new:  
 But in my Father's Kingdom." So, my Friend,  
 Let not your cup desert me in the end.  
 But when the hour of mine adventure's near  
 Just and benignant, let my youth appear  
 Bearing a Chalice, open, golden, wide,  
 With benediction graven on its side.  
 So touch my dying lip: so bridge that deep:  
 So pledge my waking from the gift of sleep,  
 And, sacramental, raise me the Divine:  
 Strong brother in God and last companion, Wine.

The poet is wishing that a life of quiet days in the peaceful valleys of the Appenines had been his. He loves Italy and the Italian countryside because for him they are synonymous with the gentle arts and culture and the agrarian loveliness of the land. The "land" is universal and therefore a symbol of Catholicism. It would be intense joy for the poet, if each of his days came to a close with the counting of his sheaves, the tinkling of the cow-bells, the herding of the cattle into the stables. This is the vision which he conjures up in his mind. Belloc is thinking, no doubt, of all the things of the "South Country" he loves best and has transferred them to the Italian scene. For one short moment, we feel, he almost regrets his life spent amid the toils of daily routine in the life of a writer and a public man - writing, lecturing, campaigning. If only the situation had been different:

Had these been mine, Ausonian Muse, to know...  
 Had these, Ausonian Muse, had these, had these...

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Is he giving in to himself? Will he fall into despair? This is the test of his Faith and he must make a choice. He tells himself that his Saviour, too, had to make a choice. This feeling is but a fleeting desire, an "ephemeral vision". Christ courageously faced His Passion, and He was God; the sailor, wrecked on some lonely shore, faces his death knowing that the world would never know his fate; the soldier, fighting with broken sword and seeking no temporal reward, offered his life as a holocaust for many. But his wounds bring no renown, his death is unsung.

Now it is the poet's turn to face the reality of death. His long labour has wasted away his youth and all too soon he must turn his thoughts to preparations for "home". For the first time in the poem he employs a simile. He compares himself to a vineyard-worker whose home awaits him when his toil is over at the end of the day. His "grape-ennobling sun" is the height of his career; the afternoon shadows of the worker's day can be compared with the twilight of his life. Now the sight of his mind and his eyes is dulled and he must be content to leave his unfulfilled ambitions in the arms of old-age - his "advancing night". Before him a mist of the unknown stretches endlessly. He is alone and can take with him nothing of his temporal goods. To what or to whom shall he turn for consolation? If he were an atheist there would be no hope, but for him it is a different matter. Though he has not

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earned it by any human right, he knows there is someone who walks beside him. He remembers a sinner who at the moment of death was promised an eternity of Heaven by an all-forgiving God-Man: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." 17

A moment, and I drink it with you new:  
But in my Father's Kingdom.

Just so, Christ, his Friend, his Comrade-Commander, will stretch forth His loving hands, and in them will be His Chalice. To the lips of the poet the Chalice will be placed and the Consecrated Wine - Christ's own Body and Blood - will bring life everlasting.

He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood  
has life everlasting and I will raise him  
up on the last day. 18

we have stated previously that it has been felt that the germ of the "Heroic Poem" was in Marot's "Chanson XXXI1". Now that we have read them both and analysed the Belloc poem in detail, we can see that it is little more than the idea of the Bacchanalian pageantry. Even the story of Vulcan the forgerer and Silenus son of Bacchus have been omitted. One would be under the impression that when Belloc started to write the poem he had only one purpose in view: to sing a Te Deum for his Faith and all it meant to him. As the poem proceeds we have seen that he had a secondary motive: to satirize the teetotalers of England and their puritannical forbears who had ousted the culture and religion of Rome and

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welcomed the ideas and the ideals of the German Protestants. It is difficult to see why he permitted himself to go this far. Were his "curses" so much a part of him that they had to break through even a masterpiece? One critic laments the addition of the satirical section but excuses the poet.

But then Belloc was a good hater; he generally hated the right things for the right reason; and he rarely hated individuals.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of heroic couplet and satire is reminiscent of Dryden which is not surprising as we are told that he admired Dryden very much for these two points of style.<sup>20</sup> Jebb tells us:

Indeed Belloc must have felt this himself, for I remember when he had just completed the poem he was troubled by the thought that in his line "And sank to sleep on Ariadne's breast", he might inadvertently have repeated one of Dryden's.<sup>21</sup>

There seems to be little other imitation in the poem, though the lines beginning the last section remind one of the opening lines of Shakespeare's sonnet:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past,  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste.<sup>22</sup>

Every line of the poetry has been polished to perfection.

19. Roughead, W.N., Times Literary Supplement, page 2.

20. Speaight, Robert, Life of Hilaire Belloc, p. 492.

21. Jebb, Reginald, Belloc the Man, Newman Press, 1957, page 93.

22. British Poetry and Prose, ed. Lieder, Vol. 2, Boston, Houghton & Mifflin Co., page 277.

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There does not seem to be a single case where the words, the rhythm and the rhyme are not completely in sympathy with the thought. Of the quality and effect of his verse, it has been said:

Belloc's is like marble carved by the hand of a master into a hundred different shapes, but always retaining the hardness of the material in which he is working. The chiselling is adapted to the work in hand, but the result is always clean-cut and satisfying. To many it is far more than satisfying. It is a joy and an inspiration. <sup>23</sup>

Whatever may be said of his style, one must admit that what Belloc said came straight from the heart. Robert Frost has said:

A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness; it is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found its words. <sup>24</sup>

The "Heroic Poem" fulfils the requirements of the above definition and it is a master-piece of self-revelation. The thought stems from his tremendous faith in Christ, in the Church and in Rome as the centre of all culture and tradition. The logical symbol for all this was wine which called forth for him the Sacrament of the altar.

It is significant that the dedication of the poem in

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23. Jebb, Reginald, Belloc: The Man, page 97.

24. Smithberger, Andrew and Camille McCole, On Poetry, New York, Doubleday, Doran and Co., Ltd., page 163.

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1929 was to Duff Cooper, first Viscount Norwich. In this same year and for two years following, Belloc campaigned for him in the general elections. It is interesting to note that Cooper witnessed the first breakdown of Belloc's dislike of the British reigning house. When the late George VI married into a Scottish family, Belloc presented to Elizabeth, through Viscount Norwich, an autographed volume of his poetry. Belloc did not forget the generosity of his friends, and to Cooper who had been most faithful over many years he dedicated the masterpiece of his verse.

Many have been the eulogies of Belloc's poetry.

Christopher Morley says:

Some of his verses ( as himself said in another matter) are "part of the furniture of my mind." Indeed they are part of what every man holds dear, the memory of youth.....I can hardly see the before-dawn sky without remembering and Septempering the last lines.....Who else could be at once so sharp and so blunt, so light of foot and so packed with momentum. <sup>25</sup>

W.B. Ready in reviewing the Anthology of Verse says:

The poem "Tarantella" is almost as cheering as the wine that Belloc loved and respected so dearly, so much so that he wrote, for his friend Duff Cooper, an "Heroic Poem, in Praise of Wine" where occur those sonorous and magnificent lines, directed to Christ, his Comrade-Commander. <sup>26</sup>

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25. Morley, Christopher, "Belloc's 80th Birthday", in the Sheed and Ward's Own Trumpet, No. 24, Sept. 1950.

26. Ready, W.B., "Hilaire Belloc and his Poetry", in Books on Trial, Vol. X, No. 1, June 1951, page 5.

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In Roland Hill's obituary he writes this of Belloc's poetry:

The tributes which were paid to Belloc at the time of his death were unanimous in ascribing to his poetry his chief claim to immortality. His poems show him who had always prided himself on his realism, as the Romantic who he really was at heart. He could be tender as well as ruthless and enshrine much meaning in a few elegant lines. His nonsense verse has long become the household property of big and little children and his sonnets and his long "Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine", that culminates in the line "Strong brother in God and last companion, Wine" belong to the finest creative achievement in the England of his time. <sup>27</sup>

When this study was started just after Belloc's death, little or nothing had been written of a literary nature on Hilaire Belloc. What had been done were eulogies of the man and not studies of his writings. Since that time his works are appearing more frequently on the shelves of Public Libraries and book stores. There are several books of memoirs and the official biography of his life by Robert Speaight. Is Belloc coming into his own? Or is the neglect of the last two decades to continue? Time will tell. The intellectual of the moment is uprooted, frustrated almost desperate. Belloc cannot speak to such a man.

Belloc can only echo the suppressed conscience of those millions of silent men - the men who

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27. Hill, Roland, "Hilaire Belloc" in the Ave Maria, Vol. 78, No. 12, Sept. 19, 1953, pages 8-9-10.

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bend over nets and who rest on their plows and who say nothing - the men who still bear within themselves the dreams and passions of Christendom: the love of one's own, the feel for the soil, the sense of arms, the hunger for certitude. Belloc speaks for the underground of Europe.

But in some future time, possibly not remote, when New Man will have exhausted himself attempting to escape his destiny, when he will have tried all the doors leading nowhere, when he will have sickened of paper humanisms, he may turn to the gnarled wisdom and the eternal youth of this last guardian of the West. If he does, he will learn what it means to be a man. 28

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28. Wilhelmsen, Frederick, *Hilaire Belloc, No Alienated Man*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1954, 108 p., page 104.

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Belloc, Hilaire, Cautionary Verses, (no place), Duckworth, 1940, 418 p.

This is a collection of Belloc's "moral instructions for children." This edition is illustrated by B.T.B. and Nicholas Bentley. There is no other illustrated copy of the child verse. The pictures are an aid to the understanding of the verse.

----- Conversation With An Angel, London, J.Cape, 1928.

This collection of essays contains "On Epigrams", which was used as a reference in the chapter on Satire.

----- Milton, London, Cassell, April 1935.

This long essay, in which Belloc analyses the works of Milton, gives us an idea of what Belloc is striving for in his own work. The work on Milton as a sonnet-writer is particularly good in studying H.B.'s sonnets.

----- On Everything, London, Methuen and Co., 1927, 294 p.

The Essay "On Song" is particularly good as an introduction to the study of Belloc's Songs.

----- Short Talks With the Dead, London, J.Cape, 22:10:28, Traveller's Library, 1928.

Four essays are useful to a study of Belloc's poetry: "Talking of Byron"; "The Good Poet and the Bad Poet", which is a preview study of the "Heroic Poem"; "Talking and Singing of the Nordic Man"; "Talking of Bad Verse". In all of his essays on poetry, we find that what Belloc admires in others are the outstanding characteristics of his own verse.

----- Sonnets and Verse, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1944, 203 p.

This edition is listed as number 141 in the "English First Editions" and is useful only as a comparison with the complete edition.

----- The Modern Traveller, illustrated by B.T.B. (no place), Knopf, 1923, 80p.

The verse is contained in the complete edition but the illustrations are useful as an aid to understanding the satire.

Cahill, Patrick, The English First Editions of Hilaire Belloc, London, Copyright P.C.Cahill, 51 p.

A chronological Catalogue of 153 works attributed to Belloc. Invaluable in compiling a bibliography for a thesis.

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Hamilton, Robert, "Hilaire Belloc: His Spirit and his Work", in the Irish Ecclesiastical Record, (#5 The Poet), Vol. LXVI: 1945, p. 51-57.

One of the longest critical essays on Belloc's poetry. It is more objective than most treatments of the verse. The writer gives both pros and cons of Belloc's poetic genius

Haynes, Renee, Hilaire Belloc, #35 in a series: "Writers and Their Work", published for the British Council and National Book League, London, Longman's, Green, 1953, 35 p.

A discussion of the types of writings of Belloc, including several well done pages on the poetry. Included in the work is an excellent bibliography. (Patrick Cahill, added an annotation here to the effect that where her dates differ from his, she is wrong.)

Jebb, Eleanor and Reginald Jebb, Belloc the Man, Westminster, Maryland, The Newman Press, 1957, x-172 p.

A subjective treatment of Belloc's life, but it is enlightening on his political career and is an assistance in the study especially of the satire.

Morton, J.B., Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir, London, Hollis and Carter, 1955, x-181 p.

A sympathetic treatment of Belloc's life. The chapters including background for and information on the songs, are very good.

Newton, Douglas, "Hilaire Belloc, 1870 - 1953", in America, Vol. 89, No. 18, Aug. 1, 1953, p. 440-41-42.

One of the few obituary articles containing much on the verse. Mentions particularly the songs and religious poetry.

Ready, W.R., "Belloc, His Poetry", in Books on Trial, Vol. X, No. 1, June 1951, p. 42.

In which he compares the secure anchorage of the poetry with the turbulence of the prose writing.

Roughead, W.N., editor, Hilaire Belloc, An Anthology of his Prose and Verse, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951, 283.p.

There is a good introduction by Roughead. Contains the essays from "Avril", Belloc's critical essays on the French poets of the Pleiade. Includes the music written by Belloc himself for several of his songs.

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Roughead, W.N., editor, The Verse of Hilaire Belloc, Holland, The Nonesuch Press, MCMLIV, No. 1387, xxv-296 p.

This is the only complete edition of the poetry, devised by Francis Meynell. 1650 copies were printed, 400 of which sold in the U.S.A. This was the primary source for all the poetry studied and quoted in the thesis.

Speaight, Robert, The Life of Hilaire Belloc, London, Hollis and Carter, 1957, xv-552 p.

This is the official biography of Belloc's life as ordered by the estate. He is sympathetic but objective. Here and there throughout the book are many notes on the poetry and historical and biographical data regarding it. It is about the best work on Belloc so far in print.

Wilhelmsen, Frederick, Hilaire Belloc, No Alienated Man, London, Sheed and Ward, 1954, 104 p.

## APPENDIX 1

## ABSTRACT OF

HILAIRE BELLOC : AN APPRAISAL OF HIS POETRY <sup>1</sup>

The study of Hilaire Belloc's poetry was prompted by the many articles written after his death extolling his verse and stating that it was the most valuable and enduring of his work.

The truth of these statements was questioned, since out of one hundred and fifty volumes listed in the complete bibliography, Belloc's poetry has been collected in one volume. But on reading further in Belloc's essays, his sister's autobiography and studies written about him and his works, it was everywhere evident that the poet himself hoped, if for nothing else, the immortality of his verse.

When the complete edition of the verse was issued in 1954, comparatively little study of it had been undertaken, though the first edition appeared in 1896. Therefore as the realm of Belloc's poetry was unexplored, it seemed worthwhile to appraise it in a thesis. Samples of the various verse forms were analyzed in separate chapters dealing with the sonnets, the songs and ballades, the child verse and the satire. The final chapter deals mainly with the "Heroic Poem

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1. M.A. Thesis presented by Sister Maris Stella, S.S.J., in 1957, to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, 175 pages.

in Praise of Wine" and weaves in the summary and the conclusion of the thesis.

While Belloc's satire has been found to be biting and coarse, yet his lyric poetry is simple, lucid and musical, and burning with love of God and of beauty. His tremendous Catholic faith penetrates the sonnets and the religious verse. It is impossible not to admit the perfection of form, the command of words and the genius in selecting exactly the right phrase to describe a human absurdity.

For an understanding of Belloc's one must become acquainted with the prose and in particular the essays. Then it is that one finds that Belloc wears well and one can go from poetry to essays and vice versa with an ever growing interest in both. Belloc wanted his verse to survive. Perhaps it could be proven that the sincere love that produced the perfection of the one complete volume of poetry has been carried into his essays where almost without his being aware of it, he has written poetic prose. In any case Belloc will rise again out of the oblivion into which he has been cast these last two decades and when he does it will be through the medium of his poetry - or his essays - or both.