HILAIRE BELLOC

How shall we approach him, this unique figure in English literature, and what are we to name him—Englishman and Frenchman, poet and politician, reactionary and revolutionary, essayist, historian, satirist, soldier and seaman, thinker and man of action, sceptic and Christian? In mood merry and sad and bitter, in style exuberant and austere—what common factor, if any, is to be found in him?

The key to this many-sided man is at once complex and simple. He is concerned, in a word, with all the activities of man, political, social, artistic and religious, as seen in the light of the living Christian tradition of Catholic Europe; a tradition which has caught up into itself and made its own the civilisations of Greece and Rome and the long searching and finding of the Jews, and which claims to interpret for all time God to man and man to himself. It is, for better or worse, *our* tradition. It is in the atmosphere we breathe, it is the soil from which we spring, it is so familiar that at times we do not notice it, it is so complex that we all know little of it directly, so simple that we find it hard to accept, so exacting that we snatch at the excuse of fashion and distaste to abandon it, yet so penetrating that we are coloured by it against our will, and bear its marks even in revolt. It is a tradition that has again and again grown weak from within and been assailed from without, it has never been unchallenged and never utterly overthrown, and its fortunes were never more vital or more uncertain than at the present day.

It is clear that such a tradition, with its interplay of pagan and Christian, and its wealth of material for philosopher and artist and historian, is not only something for men to live by, but can provide work in a dozen fields of literature. And there are few of these in which Belloc

has not worked. This is not to suggest that he is pre-eminent in each of them; but the very interplay between these different activities enriches each of them, and contributes something which specialisation cannot give. Above all, this European tradition gives unity to his historical work. And in Belloc history spills over into almost everything else, running as an undercurrent through all his essays, and emerging in all his travel books. A Greek could write 'Know thyself' with hardly a backward look, but for Belloc to know oneself is to know the history which has made us. And it is no short or untroubled history, but a theme of epic greatness and depth, for the historian to lift, if he can, into the timelessness of art.

The themes which have touched men most nearly are always themes of struggle against odds, with death and failure, with victory snatched from defeat, with love and hatred and longing and despair. In the great epics, the *Iliad,* the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Comedy,* though a thousand years lie between each of them, there is the same fierceness inextricably interwoven with tenderness, the same devotion to a patria near or far, the same unconquerable spirit of man. And, since great poetry transcends itself, suggesting more than it says, the pagan epics of battle and wandering mirror the story of humanity itself, and hold suggestions of an immortal destiny interwoven with its vicissitudes on the stage of time and place, and look forward dimly to the Christian warfare where with St. Paul we are perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken, cut down but not destroyed.

This is hardly history, it may be said; or at best it is history seen through the medium of poetry. But history itself can be no less challenging and hold possibilities no less profound. Gibbon seized on one such theme in the tremendous drama of Western Europe: the decline and fall of the Roman Empire—the massive, imperial structure with its unifying central idea, crumbling to its fall, and giving birth to new growths in its decay. It was a history

of disintegration, a theme for tragedy and irony as well as engaging all the historical faculties of a man. Belloc's theme, if we may call it so, has inspired no such *magnum opus*—it is not even the centre of any single historical work; but it is implicit in them all. It is the history of another Roman Empire, with a richer and more subtle integration, and a higher and indeed an ultimate spiritual unity. It teems with action and struggle from the Atlantic to the Syrian desert and the forests of Poland, from the Roman cities of the Sahara to the fiords of the North. There are wars of men and wars of ideas, as the Moslem tide rises in Africa and Spain and wells over the Pyrenees, till it is beaten back inch by inch, and Europe finds herself, and the soul of Spain is born. Southward and eastward the Crusades reclaim the Holy Places, and pillage Byzantium, in blood and suffering and greed; the Northmen build their castles and found their homes from Sicily to Syria, and marry Moslem and Gothic art to Christian worship—till at last the ultimate threat of Islam to Europe is broken at Lepanto, and rolled back from the walls of Vienna.

These are threats from without. Within, the heresies great and small perplex and divide; and not merely does one religious idea do battle with another, but religion, politics, nationalism and individualism interlock and grapple in the arena of Christendom, till all these conflicting forces unite in the vast disruption of the Reformation. Even this shattering upheaval cannot break either the religious unity of the Church (which, to the Catholic, is merely impoverished and despoiled), or the cultural unity of Europe, based, as it is, not merely on its inescapable geography (and no historian has been more conscious of the profound influence of geography than Belloc), but on more than a thousand years of a common life and a common faith; and through the succeeding centuries there is the threefold interest of following the main stream of the Catholic and European tradition, of tracing its offshoots, often unconscious and unacknowledged, travelling by de-

vious ways and reappearing in new guises as political and social creeds; and pursuing the fortunes of Europe as a whole.

This span of time, and these worlds of action and of thought and belief offer a wide enough field for the professional historian; and most have been content with it. But Belloc is both less and more than an historian; and behind the pageantry of history he sees the long panorama of life itself: the upward thrust of unconscious life in rock and tree; man going forth to his work until the evening, and occupying himself with the old toils and the old delights—ploughing and sowing, vintage and harvest, dance and song, and the larger liberty of horse and sail—and rising at all times and places, more or less clearly, into the explicitness of the arts. These, the best of all orators, though not independent of history, ride above it, and still speak in their universal language of Roman strength and Catholic devotion to a world which has lost the unity of the one and the faith of the other.

Such in bare outline is Belloc's theme, or rather the background of all his work: a Christendom rooted in God, and flowering in man and all his activities, deformed and despoiled, but living by virtue of a power within. It is a more personal theme than Gibbon's, since the writer is no disinterested spectator, but one whose philosophy and religion are bound up with what he records; a vaster theme, since it embraces his and goes beyond it. It strikes more deeply into the past, it looks forward more boldly into the future; it sees integration and growth where Gibbon saw only disintegration and decay; and it sees a vital integrating principle not merely without but within, not merely past but present, not merely temporal but eternal.

If this is his theme (in the broadest sense of the word), what is its appeal at the present day, and how does Belloc handle it? We may say that it is both popular and unpopular; and that his treatment is at once familiar and unfamiliar. To justify these facile paradoxes, no age

has been more fascinated by the past than is the present one; and none is inclined to view it in more rosy hues. Swept from our moorings by a century or so of the most rapid and revolutionary changes, or at least carried far down from the more slow-moving reaches of the past, we look back wistfully at their more settled beliefs and more gracious ways, and seek out their traces where they still survive in this scarred country, or in the more backward lands of Europe. So far, Belloc is in the fashion; and his essays and travel books take their place alongside a hundred others (though he was earlier in the field than most)—all touched by a lingering, loving regret. In a word, we are almost all coloured by a romantic attitude towards the past, and respond emotionally rather than intellectually to the appeal of the distant and unfamiliar. But Belloc's treatment of them is romantic with a difference. The difference is that he looks at them not from the outside but from within: they are not merely strange (the essence of the romantic experience), they are also, mysteriously, his own. Ancient in time, far-flung, and richly varied, they speak to him of home, and pierce with the stab of remembered love, as no unheralded, unowned beauty can. For the relationships of a man to his home can be many: love, estrangement, exasperation, and forgetfulness; but never a superficial sentiment. The complex interweaving, for better or worse, cannot so lightly be unwoven; and Belloc remembers his home, and in all his flights and diversions his needle points true to his origins and to his goal: the land which bore him, the traditions which shaped him, the Faith which fed him, this Europe which knits together in one visible whole all these influences—and the heaven which he looks to receive him. His continuity and credentials can be summed up in the old claim *Civis Romanus sum*: a claim which has been enlarged by history to imply a unity and fellowship both of this world and the next; not only a religious unity (to invert the historical order), but a certain continuing civic unity, which is available for

all of us, whether we acknowledge it or not. Let us not exaggerate. We are none of us wholly divorced from our past: other writers and artists work in living contact with it, and other men live by their unspoken association with it. The worship of the English countryside is not merely sentimental; and in almost every department of life men have maintained or re-established a contact with their traditions which is direct, and unaffected. In almost every department except one; but that one is fundamental—the religious tradition of Europe. Wherever Christianity may persist, it has almost vanished from literature; and whatever the strength of the general Christian tradition in England, the Catholic and Roman tradition has to depend for its literary expression on writers fit but few. And Belloc's peculiar contribution has been this—the interpretation, not only of a wide field of history, but of a rich and varied experience of a hundred places and persons and incidents, past and present, in the light of this comprehensive, historic tradition.

The results of this continuity we shall return to. But in two more ways Belloc's treatment of his subjects is something more than purely romantic. Outside the large personal element which is inseparable from a good essayist and traveller, he is objective rather than subjective, and concerned with what he is looking at rather than with his own reactions to it. Above all, he is concerned with the intellectual qualities of his subject, its structure and order. Here we have crossed the frontier between the classical and romantic—a frontier more or less artificial, for if the distinction is a valuable one, it has often never emerged historically, and they are not in the nature of things mutually exclusive. At the same time, it serves to isolate two attitudes which belong to life no less than to literature and art. Briefly, the romantic attitude, as we have seen, is subjective, is rooted in feeling and imagination, and is nourished by beauty through the senses; while the classical is concerned with the intellect rather than the senses,

with truth rather than beauty, and with the known rather than the unknown. In religion it pierces through to dogma, in architecture to structure, in literature to construction and form; while in everyday life the difference is more or less summed up in Jane Austen's distinction between *Sense and Sensibility*. It is clear that the two can never be wholly dissociated in practice; and the antithesis is more or less meaningless when applied to the best Greek and Roman literature, while the cleavage hardly appears in modern Europe till about three hundred years ago. But when it came it came with a vengeance, and we have swung through one phase or another, complementary and contradictory, ever since. It is perhaps childish to complain. Man is an experimental animal; and art cannot be static, or it dies. But if we can judge art, and, still more, conduct, at all, we must judge it by reference to something abiding and central in our experience: and furthermore it appears to be true that while extremes in both rapidly disappear, the most central traditions not only have the greatest vitality and persistence in their own day, but are turned to again and again in times to come. In fact, they become 'classical.' Meanwhile, in French and English literature, to take the examples which concern us most, the two extremes grew up of a classicism which assumed the attitude of 'What I don't know isn't knowledge,' starving not only literature but life by depreciating the imagination and senses, and decrying the unknown, and identifying the eternal laws with their particular expression in the conventions of a period and a society and class—only to provoke a reaction which exaggerated all that had been minimised, throwing down every barrier and enriching the world then and since by new discoveries and ventures both outward and inward: itself in turn unstable, and falling from a romantic buoyancy and optimism to an equally romantic disillusion and despair.

Each seems to be an equally far cry from Belloc. The truth is that, between the thesis and antithesis of classical

and romantic, Christianity provides the synthesis. It is at one with classicism in emphasising truth and order: 'in the beginning was the Word.' It is comprehensive and architectonic in thought and art, no less than in conduct. Yet with romanticism it gives scope to feeling, it instinctively expresses itself in visible beauty feeding the senses no less than the heart and mind, and it is infinite in range, belonging to all times and all places and all men. And these two sets (so to speak) of qualities are not only philosophically compatible, but in practice have met so often in such instinctive harmony that it hardly occurs to us to dissociate them there.

If this is what Christianity has done and can do in literature (as elsewhere), we can see that it is the key to Belloc's work. Classical and romantic are synthesised in him as they have been again and again in the Christian tradition. And what a large liberty this gives! For within that order, which is so much more than intellectual, there can be a riot of fancy and a wealth of feeling; as in Gothic architecture, with the structure assured, every detail could be full of imagination and individuality, while subordinated to the whole; or in a mediaeval manuscript flowers and fabulous beasts and serpents can wind their pleasing, harmless way about the margin of a breviary. Here too he joins forces with his contemporary Chesterton. Liberalism, beer, fairies and moonshine—all these seem the very antithesis of Catholicism; but Chesterton can find room for them all because he is not limited by them, but goes beyond them. Indeed, historically speaking, they flourish best in such an atmosphere: they can be enjoyed because they can be taken lightly, and are worth having just because they are not all-important. Freed from the extremes of a materialism which dispenses with the fairies and keeps the beer, and a puritanism which banishes both, or a political idealism which sees in liberty the be-all and end-all, and draws all its cheques upon the future, the Catholic pursues his way, hopeful but not optimistic, sad but not

cynical, lingering and loving, yet as a traveller and pilgrim from one home to another. Nostalgia he cannot but suffer from, whether for what he has left or for what is to come; regret he cannot wholly banish this side of sanctity; passion and pain he is subject to with all mortality. But he has great consolations. He is already late enough in time to have had many forerunners, and if he hardly does more than enjoy a little of what they have bequeathed him, he has done well.

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