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THE CHESTERBELLOC: EXAMINING THE BEAUTY OF THE BEAST

Joseph Pearce

Wells has written ... about Chesterton and Belloc without stopping to consider what Chesterton and Belloc is. This sounds like bad grammar; but I know what I am about. Chesterton and Belloc is a conspiracy, and a most dangerous one at that. Not a viciously intended one: quite the contrary. It is a game of make-believe of the sort which all imaginative grown-up children love to play ...

Now at first sight it would seem that it does not lie with me to rebuke this sort of make-believe. The celebrated G.B.S. is about as real as a pantomime ostrich. But it is less alluring than the Chesterton-Belloc chimera, because as they have four legs to move the thing with, whereas I have only two, they can produce the quadrupedal illusion, which is the popular feature of your pantomime beast.¹



GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S AFFECTIONATE ATTACK ON G.K. CHESTERTON AND HILAIRE Belloc, in an article entitled "The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon," gave birth to a duomorph destined to find its place in literary legend. Chesterton and Belloc were seen so synonymously, said Shaw, that they formed "a very amusing pantomime elephant."

Shaw's lampoon, like a well-guided harpoon, struck home. Thereafter, the popular imagination could not conjure up an image of Chesterton's whale-like girth without perceiving the shadow of Belloc in the background. Similarly, Belloc's bombast was always accompanied by the counterpoint of Chesterton's jollity. For good or ill, George Bernard Shaw, as a latter-day Victor Frankenstein, had created a monster that had developed a life of its own. The Chesterbelloc was born.

Having been born, the duomorph has refused to die. More than a century after its two component parts had first met, and almost a century since Shaw had first melded them into a mythological whole, the Chesterbelloc strides across the decades in defiance of the deteriorating landscape of fads and fashions that have passed it by. As C.S. Lewis quipped, fashions are always coming and going, but mostly going. The peripheral departs; the perennial remains.

The Chesterbelloc remains. It remains, not in the sense of the remains of a corpse or the reminiscence of a memory; it remains as a reminder of the Permanent Things. If, however, it remains, it remains as something of a riddle. What exactly is the Chesterbelloc? Is it merely a meaningless amalgam of its two components, a good Shavian joke but nothing more; or does it represent something that transcends the individual personalities that give it life? Is there something about the Chesterbelloc that is larger than life, or, rather, larger than the lives of G.K.C. and H.B.? Is it, in some mystical sense, greater than the sum of its parts? If it is true that two's company but three's a crowd,

is it true of the Chesterbelloc that two's a friendship but one's an army? In order to answer these questions or riddles it becomes necessary to dissect the beast. Such an operation is required in spite of the uncomfortable knowledge that, since the beast is alive, the dissection constitutes vivisection. Thankfully, the beast is immortal and cannot be harmed by the experience.

Perhaps the dissection should commence with a discussion of which of the two halves is more important. Who is the greater, Chesterton or Belloc? In the considered opinion of the two halves themselves, the other half is superior. Chesterton believed that Belloc was the better writer, Belloc that Chesterton was "the Master."²² In his autobiography, Chesterton was characteristically diffident as to his own literary powers but effusively laudatory as regards the literary merit of his friend. "It occurs to me," Chesterton wrote, "that the best and most wholesome test, for judging how far mere incompetence or laziness...has prevented me from being a real literary man, might be found in a study of the man of letters I happen to know best; who had the same motives for producing journalism, and yet has produced nothing but literature."²³ Belloc, begging to differ, insisted that "Chesterton expresses everything so much better than I do"²⁴ and wrote that Chesterton's poem "Lepanto" was the "summit of high rhetorical verse in all our generation."²⁵

It seems that subjecting our judgment to the subjective judgment of our subjects does not get us very far. It is necessary, therefore, to consider their relative merits ourselves. Both writers were prolific in terms of the quantity of their work and prodigious in terms of its versatility. They were what can be termed, in the truest sense, men of letters. They were poets, novelists, essayists, biographers, historians, satirists, political and economic commentators, journalists, critics, humorists, Catholic apologists and controversialists. Refusing to kowtow before the specious boast of the specialist, they proceeded with merry abandon to trample down the delineations of genre. If we are to discern their relative merits, and the relative superiority of one over the other, we must follow them on their adventurous journey through the jungle of genres through which they strayed.

In terms of verse, both men have bequeathed to posterity a body of work which places them amongst the *illustrissimi* of twentieth century poets. Chesterton's "The Rolling English Road" and "The Donkey" continue to be resurrected regularly, and rightfully, in popular antholo-



gies, but their appearance only highlights the sin of omission implicit in the exclusion of other poems of at least equal merit. Why, one wonders, is "The Secret People" seldom included in these populist volumes? Why is his lovingly plaintive "Hymn," "O God of earth and altar," so seldom seen and so hardly ever heard? Why are the whimsically sublime merits of "The Fish" or "The Skeleton," so similar to "The Donkey" in style and design and at least its equal in stature, rarely noted? In spite of the hostility of modernity, *The Ballad of the White Horse* remains as a permanent monument to heroic verse in an age that hates heroism. Ultimately, however, Chesterton deserves to be remembered as the poet who gifted the world with a poem of the stature of "Lepanto." This was, as we have seen, the considered judgment of Belloc. It is also the considered judgment of the present writer. If Chesterton is remembered for nothing other than being the poet who reached, in "Lepanto," the "summit of high rhetorical verse in all our generation" he will have earned himself a place amongst the immortals. Thankfully, he is remembered for much more.

It would appear that, as a poet, Chesterton is a hard act to follow. Belloc, however, is not only capable of following Chesterton, he actually succeeds in stealing the show. For all Chesterton's achievement in verse, Belloc is the superior craftsman. For sheer rumbustiousness, Chesterton can not match the riotous invective of "Lines to a Don," Belloc's vituperative riposte to the don "who dared attack my Chesterton"; for sheer indefatigable vigour, Chesterton has no answer to the romp and stomp of Belloc's "The End of the Road"; for a doom-laden sense of "the ruins of time," Chesterton's knell must kneel before the toll of Belloc's "Ha'nacker Mill"; for the mystical sense of the exile of life, Chesterton cannot match the Yeatsian yearning betwixt faith and

betwixt faith and faerie that Belloc evokes in “Twelfth Night”; for sheer ingenuity of metre and scansion, Chesterton’s regularly beating drum has no answer to the hip, hop, clap of Belloc’s scintillating “Tarantella”.

In the realm of comic verse or the ribaldry of their drinking songs, Belloc’s bellowing voice does not always succeed in drowning out the more dulcet tones of Chesterton. A comparison between the songs embedded in Chesterton’s novel, *The Flying Inn*, and those that punctuate Belloc’s “farrago,” *The Four Men*, illustrates that Chesterton could sometimes match Belloc as a composer of fine and funny lyrics. Who but Chesterton could compose a poem about St. George, entitled “The Englishman,” in which “dragon” is rhymed with “flagon” in the first four lines; who but Chesterton, in “Wine and Water,” could write about Noah that he didn’t care where the water went “if it doesn’t get into the wine”? Who but Chesterton could believe that “God made the wicked Grocer” as “a mystery and a sign” so that men would shun their “awful shops/ And go to inns to dine”? As though these were not enough, Chesterton delights us with much more of the same before the novel’s end: “The Rolling English Road,” “The Song of Quoodle,” “The Logical Vegetarian,” “The Saracen’s Head,” “Me Heart” and “The Song of the Strange Ascetic,” amongst others. It is no wonder that *The Flying Inn* is remembered more for its poems than its plot.

Belloc is not easily outdone, however, and *The Four Men* responds to Chestertonian jollity with Bellocian bumptiousness. The very title of one of the poems in Belloc’s “farrago” conveys an irrepressibility of spirit typical of the author: the “Song of the Pelagian Heresy for the Strengthening of Men’s Backs and the very Robust Out-thrusting of Doubtful Doctrine and the Uncertain Intellectual.” How can one fail to fall in love with a writer who has the audacity to compose a poem that warrants such a title? *The Four Men* also contains the notorious (and delightful!) “Sailor’s Carol,” which is full of Faith and Hope though precious little Charity! Unlike *The Flying Inn*, however, the storyline of *The Four Men* is not eclipsed by the verse contained therein. *The Four Men* carries the poetry, easily and comfortably, as a natural outgrowth from the organic development of its storyline.

If Chesterton almost succeeds in matching Belloc, chuckle for chuckle, with respect to the comic verse he composed, he is defeated in mirth by Belloc’s composition of the incomparable *Cautionary Tales for Children*.

Chesterton’s claim to supremacy as a humorist in verse is finally killed by the kindergarten army of Matilda, who told such dreadful lies; Jim, who ran away from his Nurse, and was eaten by a Lion; and Algernon, who played with a loaded gun, and, on missing his sister, was reprimanded by his father.

Having examined the position of the two halves of the Chesterbelloc as poets, we can proceed to their relative merit as novelists. Nobody was more dismissive of Chesterton’s merit as a novelist than was Chesterton himself. “[M]y real judgment of my own work,” he confessed in his autobiography, “is that I have spoilt a number of jolly good ideas in my time”:

I think *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* was a book very well worth writing; but I am not sure that it was ever written. I think that a harlequinade like *The Flying Inn* was an extremely promising subject, but I very strongly doubt whether I kept the promise. I am almost tempted to say that it is still a very promising subject-for somebody else. I think the story called *The Ball and the Cross* had quite a good plot ... but I am much more doubtful about whether I got a great deal out of it ... [C]onsidered as novels, they were not only not as good as a real novelist would have made them, but they were not as good as I might have made them myself, if I had really even been trying to be a real novelist.⁶

It would be easy, and tempting, to dismiss this self-criticism as a further example of Chesterton’s charming humility. The temptation should, however, be resisted. At the commencement of the appraisal of his own value as a novelist, Chesterton specifically dismisses any notion that his self-deprecation is the result of “mock modesty.” There is, therefore, no escaping the uncomfortable conclusion that Chesterton really believed that his novels were failures.

The key question is not whether Chesterton believed himself to be a failure as a novelist but whether we agree with him. Such a sweeping dismissal of his own work leaves his admirers with little option but to ask themselves awkward questions. If they had previously admired his novels, they might conclude, if Chesterton’s judgment is correct, that they have been deluded as to the merits of his fiction. The alternative, viz, that Chesterton is woefully wrong in his judgment, is scarcely more reassuring to those accustomed to accepting his judgment as the epitome of both salience and sagacity. Thankfully,

however, this is not the only alternative available. It is possible to believe that Chesterton was correct in his judgment without the necessity of becoming dismissive as to the merits of the novels themselves. There is little doubt that the three novels he mentions suffer from a looseness of compositional structure and what might be called a slapdash approach to plot consistency and character development. These are, as Chesterton rightly surmised, serious deficiencies, literarily speaking. He is also correct, however, in his appraisal of the novels as being “well worth writing” and “extremely promising” in their initial inspiration. Each of Chesterton’s ideas for the novels contained a kernel of energy which the author allowed to run riot across the pages of his stories. The lack of control might constitute a “failure” according to purely literary criteria, but who can resist the sheer exhilaration of a roller-coaster ride in the presence of such a mind playing with such ideas?

It is intriguing, and probably significant, that Chesterton failed to make any mention of his finest and most successful novel, *The Man who was Thursday*, in his self-deprecatory remarks. This particular novel, though it suffers from the same deficiencies as his others, contains and conveys such profundity that it demands a place amongst the most important novels of the twentieth century. Imagine an amalgam of Dickensian caricature, Stevensonian adventure and Wildean nightmare, injected with Thomistic insight and infused throughout with Franciscan mysticism. Seldom has a single novel plumbed such depths, reached such heights and conveyed such colour. For this novel alone, if for nothing else, Chesterton deserves to be considered one of the most important fiction writers of the last century.

Belloc, by comparison, has little to show in terms of fiction of enduring stature and, like Chesterton, he had a low opinion of his own work. In his own estimation, his novels were not as memorable as the illustrations by Chesterton with which they were adorned. As with Chesterton, however, there are exceptions—even if they are exceptions which tend to prove the rule. In the same way in which Chesterton had rather intriguingly, and possibly significantly, excluded his finest novel from those which he derided, Belloc believed that his late novel, *Belinda*, was the one work of fiction with which he

could feel satisfied. Certainly *Belinda* displays a delicacy and lightness of touch that is missing from the ponderous plod of his earlier satirical novels. It also exhales an exuberance that is rare in his later work. Seldom, in the wake of his wife’s death in 1914 and the death of his son on active service with the Royal Flying Corps four years later, had Belloc reproduced the humour which had been one of the most attractive characteristics of his earlier work. *Belinda* emerges, therefore, as a breath of freshness amidst the sombre propriety of much of Belloc’s later work. It is, however, much more than that. “Of all Belloc’s works in prose *Belinda* is the most perfect, the most original, the most timeless, and therefore perhaps the most secure,” wrote Robert Speaight, Belloc’s biographer. He continued by stating that it was “also the most difficult to define”:


“The Man who was
Thursday *contains and
conveys such profundity that
it demands a place amongst
the most important novels
of the twentieth century.*”


If we call it ‘pastiche,’ we realize at once that we have employed too light and artificial a word. Artificial in a sense it is, and no one could describe it as heavy; but deep feeling underlies the artifice and the humour has the weight of Belloc’s own gravitas. The book grinds no axe and proves no point. It is a gratuitous, disinterested and quite impersonal essay in romantic irony. Small in scale and purposely conventional in subject, it still leaves an impression of grandeur; fine, not finicky; hard as a diamond and delicate as wrought iron.⁷

If, as Speaight maintains, *Belinda* can be called an essay in romantic irony, there is an amusing irony in the fact that it appears to contradict what Belloc had written in his essay “On Irony” almost twenty years earlier. “Irony is a sword, and must be used as a sword,” he had written. In *Belinda* irony is not wielded as a weapon, but flourished like a feather. It is not used to bludgeon its victim senseless, but to tickle him with an affectionate sensibility.

Belinda is for Belloc what *The Man who was Thursday* is for Chesterton: it is the one literary achievement in fiction that assures him a place amongst the great novelists of his day. Perhaps, however, one should not leave a discussion of Belloc’s purely literary merit in prose without alluding to those two wonderful books, *The Path to Rome* and *The Four Men*. Neither book can be categorized as

fiction, though the latter presents an assemblage of imaginary characters worthy of any novel; ; neither can either book be dismissed as mere works of nonfiction, in the arid sense in which the word is usually taken. *The Path to Rome* and *The Four Men* are, first and foremost, great works of literature meriting their place in the literary canon of the twentieth century. If Belloc had not written a single word of fiction, these two works would have assured him a place amongst the literary giants of his day.

We have lingered on the purely literary status of the Chesterbelloc, principally because it is through its artistic achievement that the beauty of the beast is most clearly evident. Nonetheless, no examination of the beast would be complete without a discussion of its position as a powerful commentator on socio-economic and political issues, nor would any examination be considered adequate without due attention to its role as a fearless Defender of the Faith. A full examination is not possible within the parameters of a single essay, so we shall have to content ourselves with a short summary of the Chesterbelloc's importance in these areas.

As socio-economic and political commentators, Chesterton and Belloc have bequeathed to posterity an invaluable iteration of the social teaching of the Church. The sociopolitical creed dubbed "distributism" by the Chesterbelloc is merely the social doctrine known as "subsidiarity" in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Chesterton bowed to Belloc's preeminence as a disseminator of the ideas of distributism, declaring Belloc the master in relation to whom he was merely a disciple. "You were the founder and father of this mission," Chesterton wrote, "we were the converts but you were the missionary...you first revealed the truth both to its greater and its lesser servants...Great will be your glory if England breathes again."⁸ In fact, of course, Belloc was merely the propagator and the populariser of the Church's social doctrine as expounded by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, a doctrine that would be re-stated, re-confirmed and reinforced by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo anno* and by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus annus*. Belloc's key works in this area were *The Servile State* and *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, whereas Chesterton's *The Outline of Sanity* and his late essay, "Reflections on a Rotten Apple," published in *The Well and the Shallows*, represent the most salient and sapient contribution of the other half of the Chesterbelloc to the cause of subsidiarity. It should also be noted

that Chesterton's novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, is essentially a distributist parable.

Chesterton is perhaps perceived as a greater Catholic apologist than Belloc, largely due to the enormous influence that his two important works, *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*, exerted on several generations of converts to the Faith. Without wishing to understate the importance of either of these works, or indeed other works of apologetics by Chesterton, it is necessary to raise a small plaintive voice in praise of Belloc's seminal work, *Survivals and New Arrivals*. This sadly neglected work needs to be rediscovered. In essence it sets out the intellectual history of the past two thousand years, delineating the areas of heresy and illustrating the perennial truth and wisdom of the Church. Its style is more cumbersome and perhaps less exhilarating than Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* or *The Everlasting Man*. Chesterton takes our breath away with his vision of the Church as a heavenly chariot "thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect."⁹ Belloc, in *Survivals and New Arrivals*, makes us gasp in amazement as we perceive the Church as an unstoppable tank trundling over the horizon onto the landscape of history, relentlessly overpowering the impotent defence of its enemies. Whether one prefers the pyrotechnical prose of Chesterton, where the dazzling words serve as swords to cut down the enemy-word-play as swashbuckling sword-play, wordsmanship as swordsmanship-or whether one prefers Belloc's battering-rams and heavy artillery, the defence of the Faith is successful in both cases.

Having spread the Chesterbelloc on the operating table, we feel that we have failed to dissect the beast as we had hoped. On the contrary, we feel that, far from making incisive inroads into the anatomy of the beast, we have barely scratched its surface. **It would need a whole book to study the nature of the Chesterbelloc with anything like the meticulousness that the subject requires.** Perhaps the book will one day be written. In the meantime, this short exploratory operation has at least enabled us to see that both halves of the Chesterbelloc are indispensable. Chesterton's child-like and whimsical genius is enhanced by the balance of Belloc's gravitas; Belloc's bellicosity and bombast is softened by the counterpoise of Chesterton's charity. Perhaps we have at least discovered enough to confirm that the Chesterbelloc, as a mystical and mytho-

logical mythological beast, is greater than its component parts. Perhaps we can truly infer that, as far as this particular beast is concerned, two is indeed a friendship but one is an army. Since our end is our beginning, as Mary Stuart proclaimed and as T .S. Eliot never ceased to remind us, we shall end as we began. We commenced with a playfully plaintive comment by one of the Chesterbelloc's most illustrious enemies; we shall end in the same fashion. We began with Shaw; we shall end with Wells.

Wells complained that "Chesterton and Belloc have surrounded Catholicism with a kind of boozy halo."¹⁰ Wells, as usual, was wrong. As amusingly attractive as is the image he successfully presents, he is unable to discern the magnitude of the truth he fails to perceive. Catholicism is not in need of a halo, boozy or otherwise. As the Mystical Body of Christ, she has her halo en-

shrined within her very Being. The Chesterbelloc's value to the Church, and consequently its value to the world, is as a sometimes boozy defender of that halo. All sons and daughters of Christendom should, in the name of the halo of holiness, raise their glasses to the Chesterbelloc. May we always rejoice in the "boozy" beauty of the beast,

And thank the Lord
For the temporal sword,
 And howling heretics too;
And whatever good things
Our Christendom brings,
 But especially barley brew!¹¹



NOTES

- 1 George Bernard Shaw, "The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon," published in *New Age*, 15 February 1908.
- 2 Fr. John O'Connor, *Father Brown on Chesterton* (London, 1937), 143.
- 3 G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (New York, 1936), 298.
- 4 Robert Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* (New York: 1970 edn.), 481.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 297-8.
- 7 Speaight, *op.cit.* 500-501.
- 8 *New Witness*, 27 April 1923.
- 9 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London, 1908), 169.
- 10 Quoted in Alfred Noyes, *Two Worlds for Memory* (London, 1953), 260.
- 11 Belloc, "Song of the Pelagian Heresy, etc." from *The Four Men* (London, 1948 edn.), 95.