

Rediscovering Belloc's Verse

By Jonathan Chaves

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

—Hilaire Belloc

ACROSS THE STREET from the entrance to Princeton University stands one of my favorite bookstores, Micawber Books, and I visit there late each August when I go to Princeton to address the Luce Scholars, a group of young graduate students and professionals preparing to spend a year in Asia.

On a recent trip, a sober tan volume beckoned to me from the shelves of the poetry section, which I always go to first, and it proved to be a first edition of Hilaire Belloc's *Sonnets and Verse*, published in 1924. It is now a prized possession.

Conservatives know Belloc (1870-1953) primarily as the author of the classic *The Servile State* (1912), listed as one of the "Great Books of the Conservative Tradition" by Jeffrey O. Nelson in his pamphlet, "Ten Books that Shaped America's Conservative Renaissance." In this work, Belloc laid out the principles of Distributism—the "third way" between large-scale, "plutocratic" capitalism and socialism—championed by Belloc and his friend and associate G.K. Chesterton, a system by which private property would be sacrosanct but would remain small-scale, as it had been for centuries before the emergence of modern corporatism.

I was also aware that Belloc was a superb essayist and had penned some of the finest travel writing in modern literature, such masterpieces as *The Path to Rome* (1902) and the miniature gems in *Hills and the Sea* (1906). And then I knew Belloc's *The Great Heresies*, in which he had written with a foresight

that today seems nothing less than prophetic, "Millions of people ... of Europe and America have forgotten all about Islam They take for granted that it is just a foreign religion which will not concern them. It is, in fact, the most formidable and persistent enemy which our civilization has had [T]he story is by no means over; the power of Islam may at any moment re-arise." Can we read these words, written in 1938, without a chill today?

Like Chesterton, Belloc turns out to have been a poet of distinction, today largely ignored as such because, again like Chesterton's, his poetry is metrical and rhymed and utterly at odds with the modernist mainstream of the day that the academy has long since established as the only stylistic option worthy of respect. Very recently, R.J. Stove has, happily, recalled attention in these pages to Belloc's accomplishment in verse. But when I came upon this book three years ago, virtually no contemporary writer seemed to have noticed this aspect of his *oeuvre*. Of course, Belloc's hilarious comic poems in *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* (1897) are still in print with Dover Books and are still fairly widely read. I had known of them before finding *Sonnets and Verse*, and considered "The Hippopotamus" to be perhaps the finest couplet ever written:

I shoot the Hippopotamus with
bullets made of platinum,
Because if I use leaden ones, his
hide is sure to flatten 'em.

But even in this delightful book, and the follow-up volume, *More Beasts for Worse Children* (1898), Belloc had used humor to make quite profound points about the errors of modernity, as in my favorite, "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
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!

This must be one of the first expressions, if not the very first, of the key insight that scientists, driven more by scientism than by true science, have dogma of faith themselves, allowing mere hypotheses to take on the coloration of established facts.

But it was with true astonishment that I read my new purchase and discovered that not only was Belloc a good serious poet, he was outstanding! Of course, the satiric poems were consistent with the great sense of humor displayed in the books of beasts; and so such a poem as "Lines to a Don," defending Chesterton against an attack by a contemporary academic, was not as much of a surprise as others:

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,
Don pinched, Don starved,
Don miserable;
Don stuttering, Don with
roving eyes,
Don nervous, Don of crudities ...

And this is only the beginning. The poem goes on for three pages, drawing a devastating portrait of a type all too familiar to us today, the academic who hides, beneath an exterior of effeminacy and mincing politeness, a smoldering

rage against any who advocate for Truth. This is invective par excellence.

Perhaps too it was expected that he would tackle Catholic themes, as he was, of course, a devout Catholic. His "Ballade to Our Lady of Czestochowa," which Stove correctly links to the great Metaphysical tradition in English poetry (one thinks especially of Richard Crashaw), is one of the most convincing poetic expressions of religious devotion in modern English poetry:

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 ...

But less expected, and in fact, to a literary historian such as myself, exciting to discover, was that Belloc wrote a

series of 31 untitled sonnets that must simply be considered among the finest of this noble type in all of modern English poetry! I limit myself to quoting one, the 15th, in its entirety:

Your life is like a little winter's day
Whose sad sun rises late to set
too soon;
You have just come—why will you
go away,
Making an evening of what should
be noon?
Your life is like a little flute
complaining
A long way off, beyond the
willow trees;
A long way off, and nothing left
remaining
But memory of a music on the
breeze.

Your life is like a pitiful
leave-taking
Wept in a dream before a man's
awaking,
A Call with only shadows
to attend:
A Benediction whispered and
belated
Which has no fruit beyond a
consecrated,
A consecrated silence at the end.

Until reading this, my favorite poem on the most painful and challenging of subjects, the death of a child, was written by the great Chinese painter and poet Shen Chou (1427-1509); I had published my translation of it in 1986:

"Consoling Wu Te-cheng on the
Death of His Son"

In mourning for your second son,
you have written six poems
and still not expressed
the depth of your sorrow.
But weeping bitter tears
will bring no relief—
you will find his spirit
everywhere.

Inscribe an epitaph on jade
from the western mountains
for your family's lost treasure,
this pearl
sunk in the ocean.

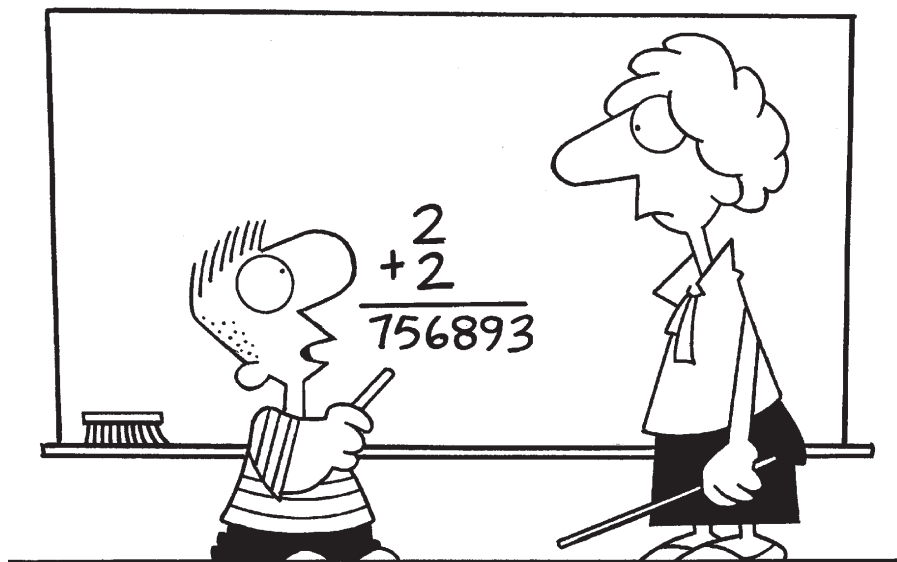
And the spring is still beautiful;
old as you are,
you have planted orchids—
watch them sprout
and bear blossoms
in time.

And there is something almost Chinese in Belloc's perfect image of the "little flute complaining ... beyond the willow trees."

But when one realizes that Belloc also compares the child's brief existence to "a dream before a man's awaking," the poignant possibility emerges that his sonnet is addressed to the soul of one of the untold millions of children who died before even having had the opportunity to be born.

Here is a man who keeps alive in the modern age the great traditions of religious faith and transcendent poetry, and in works such as his 15th sonnet, joins them in a perfect marriage. ■

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"In an increasingly complex world,
sometimes old questions require new answers."

Sloppy Clothes, Shabby Manners



I shall spare you commenting on 957 pages of psychobabble, namely how the American version of Ahmad Chalabi became such a fluent liar.

Bill Clinton's opus about his "parallel lives" bores me stiff. As he always reminded us during Monicagate, we should move on. But he came to mind as I boarded an airplane to fly to the birthplace of selective democracy—Athens, Greece, to be exact. On board were two royal Greek princes, Pavlos and Nikolaos, both dressed impeccably and simply, the way gentlemen used to dress when traveling. I was a little worse for wear, pun intended, but with a blazer and proper slacks. Just as familiarity breeds contempt, informality generates disrespect. As soon as we were airborne, an obviously stressed stewardess addressed me by my first name. "How nice to know we were in school together," I told her with a smile. I was using the Harold Pinter defense. The playwright has many faults, but he is a master of the devastating retort when he feels a lack of civility towards his person. When addressed as "Harold" by total strangers, he either ignores them or asks them about school. It might sound pompous, but Pinter was born very poor in east London and obviously learned good manners from his hard-working parents.

Clinton and his asides to students about his underwear are typical of the vulgar times in which we live. But he is not alone. At the G8 summit on Sea Island, Ga., the only man who dressed properly was—dare I say it?—the president of France. Everyone else was "smart casual," but Gap dress does little to dignify high office. Man-of-the-people matiness was started by Bill Clinton, with his grotesque running shorts and sneakers while playing golf. The reason Clinton went for "smart casual" had, as

in everything he did, an ulterior motive: "You can trust me, I am not wearing a suit." Real '60s stuff. Commenting on Chirac's wearing a necktie while the rest lounged around in ugly "smart casual," a man with the unfortunate name of Kenneth Dreyfack wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* that a tie makes one look priggish and a nerd, "exactly the kind of weirdo no one wants to get stuck sitting next to at a party."

Sorry Dreyfack (I hope I'm pronouncing your name wrong), but it is exactly the opposite. There is nothing wrong with formality, and a hell of a lot wrong with familiarity. Wearing a tracksuit on an airplane might be comfortable, but I find it slightly disrespectful. "Clothes make the man," said the Mississippi sage, Mark Twain, and casual dress has always shown itself to be a threat to good order and decorum. Those ghastly hippies, among whom Bill Clinton hid from the draft, not only lacked social graces, they made casual dress a uniform of disrespect for tradition and Western culture. The arrogant disdain shown by them was matched only by their selfishness and greed. And speaking of greed, Hollywood types, people like David Geffen and Oliver Stone, love casual. Geffen, extolling gay power, wears sneakers and a T-shirt with his dinner jacket. Michael Moore, a legendary slob, ditto.

Popular culture teaches us that fashion should be liberating. It is a clumsy argument made by philistines who possess the sensibilities of a Stalinist bureaucrat and the taste of Barbra Streisand. The shabbiness of the modern man—and woman, mind you—comes at the expense of a society

unashamed of its vices. Smart dress has nothing to do with class or wealth. It has to do with pride, taste, and a sense of achievement. After all, when was the last time you saw a mugger wearing a tailcoat and top hat? Gentlemen, however, often do.

But more of Dreyfack. "It's no accident that the first thing repressive institutions such as the armed forces or prisons do to establish control over individuals is to make them change their clothing," he writes in the *IHT*. What can one say when reading such rubbish? It is a carefully embellished myth that dressing casual is in some way standing shoulder to shoulder with the electorate against the establishment, and that in being well dressed one is in some way decadent, snobby, and treacherous. This is why we have in one generation gone from a formal, well-behaved society into the casual modernity that uses the F-word constantly and sees soap-opera stars and badly-behaved, women-bashing multi-millionaire basketball players as role models.

Hollywood has a lot to answer for. High glamour ruled the place during its golden age. Remember that wonderful picture of the great Gary Cooper and Clark Gable in white tie drinking champagne? It was uplifting and as graceful as Fred Astaire, yet another gent. Now the aforementioned Streisand sports thrift-store cast-offs while pretending to be a woman of the people. But I'd hate to be a poor person trespassing by mistake on her property, or a young surfer landing on David Geffen's private beach. (Unless he's gay, that is.) Modern actors look like bag ladies and act worse. Somehow it is all dreadfully unconvincing. An average Joe does not have to look like a Hollywood slob, but then average Joes usually have far more dignity than Hollywood types and America's 42nd president. ■