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G. K. CHESTERTON AND PRE-RENAISSANCE EUROPE

1. Introductory

A study on the above subject was written in English eight years ago. In 1950 some essential points of it were presented to the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Polish résumé of the usual size (3 pages) was printed in the Proceedings of the Committee of Modern Philology.

The present paper is a more extensive summary of the study, pending its complete publication.

The study itself consists in an attempt to throw some objective light on the problem, inciting many to obscure accusations and subjectivist guesses, of G. K. Chesterton's „mediaevalism".

The author deliberately refrained from using the latter term in the title, to avoid any appearance of inclining at the very outset towards the opinion of those who would see in a great part of G. K. C.'s literary output an unqualified apotheosis of the epoch of the crusades and a wish to revive it fully. On the other hand it is obvious that Chesterton's interest in the Middle Ages, from *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* onwards was real and reached much farther than his curiosity for other periods of history.

The author of the enquiry tried therefore to show the extent of the interest, its sources and the limits up to which it can be said to agree with facts of history. The artistic expression, where existing, was also analysed.

A task of this kind seemed to impose itself, if G. K. C.'s position as a thinker is to be judged properly: it has to be done for every man of genius who is not a scholar, but whose ideas influence a wide section of the public.

At the same time the study, as the author believes, could be useful for more purely literary aims. Not only because of certain aesthetic analyses which it contains, but also because of the background it supplies for such analyses and criticism by others. A background of this sort — biographical and ideological — is often helpful if we are to estimate a writer's creative apparatus. But especially in Chesterton's case his kind of imagery and style and the type of his construction are so evidently connected with his historical interests that explaining the latter may lead to the elucidation of the former.

2. Chesterton's natural bias.

There are people for whom, more than for others, manhood is an extension of childhood. G. K. Chesterton was one of these and yet this did not deprive his mature mind of wealth and broadness.

If we now wish to pass in review the causes which led G. K. C. to be interested in the Middle Ages, we must accordingly begin by recalling his childhood and take into account, precisely from his youngest years, his love of bright colours and of the picturesque, as well as the corresponding disgust with the drabness of the late Victorian surroundings.

Boyhood over, we come across the friendship with Belloc whom Chesterton chose for guide in matters historical with such faithfulness, the subsequent interest in the „Old Religion" (together with the epoch in which it had flourished in England) and the desire to reach the historical roots of what he did not like in the modernity.

In the aesthetic part of G. K. C.'s attitude to the epoch of troubadours, Maurice Evans [1]) will thus discover „a strong strain of the Pre-Raphaelite" (in particular a resemblance to D. G. Rossetti), the influence of „the chivalric love code" and, the

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[1]) In *Gilbert Keith Chesterton,* Cambridge University Press 1939, p. 115.

aptest observation of all, a rich use of colour (*The Ballad of the White Horse*).

There is also, here and there, some natural affinity between Chesterton's frame of mind and that of the mediaeval man. Las Vergnas discovers it in *The Man Who Was Thursday* — not merely on account of the motif of a dream, but because of the whole combination of praise and buffoonery, so much as in a Gothic cathedral [2]). Moreover, there are even occasional expressions and ways of putting things where a resemblance to the Scholastic mind at its best might be detected.

But that refers, naturally, to one aspect only of the great writer's interest in the epoch in question. To understand it to the full, one has to delve into his general philosophy.

The point to grasp is the adherence to a permanent conception of Man. A series of basic statements about Man, which could seem quite commonplace from the traditional viewpoint, was however necessary at a time when all that had once been viewed as self-evident and axiomatic began to be questioned. Thence their place in Chesterton's thought. The statements could be ranged under the following paragraphs: Man is a reasonable and free being, a person; he is tied to his body in an essential way, limited physically and morally, endowed with feelings, capable of sacrifice and sublimity, culminating in religion.

With this background, Chesterton's approach to the Middle Ages to a great extent consisted in a search (unconscious?) for such characteristics of the epoch as would fit this conception of man and be shown to have satisfied his corresponding needs. It is not the approach of a disinterested historian (if there is such a man) which, by the way, Chesterton never pretended to have. Nor can we say that there was any set task — even in an amateurish way — to sound the mediaeval problems as a whole

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[2]) R. Las Vergnas: *Chesterton, Belloc, Baring*, Sheed & Ward, 1938, p. 16.

and present them to the reading public. On the other hand, rather few of his contentions, even if often scattered about his writings, are groundless and, compared with other amateurs in this field, he appears more fair. Anyhow, the approach such as it is, fulfilling to a certain extent the role of an *Arbeithypothese* has helped to bring to light certain neglected sides of the Middle Ages. In other cases, G. K. C.'s efforts may look to specialists like taking pains to bring home truths long known, but we cannot forget that he is after all a high-class journalist, fighting *popular* misconceptions. Even scholarly research was however more than once stimulated by amateurs and this may be the case with Chesterton's „mediaevalism".

3. Subject Delimitation

This much about the approach. With regard to the range of the subject itself, for G. K. C. the Middle Ages begin after A. D. 1000, their end falling around the usually accepted dates. As to the limitation in space, the writer's interest (or, for that matter, knowledge) did not extend beyond Western Europe, with the exception of the chapters, devoted to the Near East in „The *New Jerusalem*". In spite of his interest in Poland, it would be hard to find any proof at all of his being acquainted with the mediaeval history of Central-Eastern Europe. In a general way, whatever be writes in the way of social or general history of the Middle Ages, rather refers primarily to England. If we bear this in mind, we shall be less prone to accuse him of inaccuracies.

And now a review of the mediaevalist theses, ranged after the above-mentioned humainist conceptions. It will help us to wind up our study on the same motives which we took for starting point and give it some uniformity.

4. Mediaeval Humanism

a) The Middle Ages show us Man, in G. K. C.'s perspective, first as the reasoning student and organizer of reality. The author

of *St. Thomas Aquinas* enhances the epoch of the great Doctor as one of reason. The Schoolmen are shown as its cultivators. Logic is one of the favourite subjects [3]). The *Doctor,* surnamed *Angelicus,* is, to his distinguished modern biographer, rather first of all the defender of human reason, of science and a fair debater, dauntless in his appreciation of non-Christian thinkers.

Since man needs no less than truth, the mediaeval people looked after no less a thing. They cared for ideas as ideas [4]), not merely for ideas better or worse adapted to their time.

Accepting the need of dogma in religion, the mediaeval people could have a healthy doubt in other matters, showing the power of common sense in the epoch [5]). The above-mentioned love of logic may be seen in many things, in the growth of the Gothic much less „wild" than some nineteenth century writers were fond of believing [6]) or even in the horrors of the Inquisition [7]); their intellectual attitude was shown in the search for sense in life [8]) in the rational and planning activities [9]) or in the appreciation of the hierarchical order of ends and means in the Schoolmen, in Dante's preference for clear ideas [10]).

All these observations find their completing counterpart in the emphasis on the promotion of learning and culture by the Church, especially by the monks and such „monkish" kings as Alfred the Great.

It is not difficult to oppose various contrary facts to almost every one of the alleged items; bearing in mind the *real* amount

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[3]) *Chaucer and His Age,* p. 221.

[4]) *What's Wrong with the World,* III, 10.

[5]) *On Monsters* in *The Uses of Diversity* and *Avowals and Denials,* p. 114.

[6]) *William Cobbet,* p. 154.

[7]) *Heretics,* p. 16.

[8]) *Pageants and Dress* in *The Uses of Diversity.*

[9]) *Eugenics and Other Evils,* p. 91.

[10]) *On Two Allegories* in *The Thing.*

of superstition, narrowness, credulity etc. in this age which Chesterton praises for its breadth, balance and intellect. The low level of experimental science, small number of exceptions like Roger Bacon, often a complete refusal to treat it as such, is another obvious objection. What we need however is the realisation that Chesterton not so much forgets the dark sides, as, by showing the bright ones, tries to make the picture complete and put into it the essential factors, believing that the philosophic framework, outlined for human science by Aquinas was a thing more important to consider than the scarcity of the concrete achievemens of this same science.

b) So now on to the second great paradox, calling the Middle Ages „a free country". It is no good attempting to verify Chesterton's records of social facts of history. As always with G. K. C., it is his deep-going excavations into the foundations of the culture that reveal to him its vital tendency even if this tendency be betrayed by practical institutions.

Thus, at the very start we must put something that may seem remote from everyday consequences: the essential victory over fatalism which followed the spread of Christianity. The bare fact of having a belief in some spiritual values may have made for a growth of freedom [11]). The tremendous sense of self-responsibility brings in a creative atmosphere: man can contend with cosmos and with himself, he can hope and build. This superior wisdom was flung by Alfred in the weary faces of the heathen followers of Guthrum in *The Ballad of the White Horse.* It is the sense of self-responsibility which makes it possible for people to bind themselves and expect others to be bound by their declarations and pledges (the philosophy of the vow) [12]) In fact a slave, as soon as he swears some kind of allegiance, paves the way for his future emancipation, however remote:

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[11]) *Fancies versus Fads,* p. 184.

[12]) *The Superstition of Divorce,* p. 94, 67 ss.

he is treated like a man who answers for his words, not any more like a chattel.

Thus we find Chesterton emphasizing the importance of the Christian insistence on man's metaphysical freedom, basically vital, even if it was for a long time insufficiently fruitful on the social plane. Nineteenth century liberalism, though politically so outspoken about liberty, was paralysed because in its case the philosophical basis was poor.

It is such correct, if theoretical calculation, that seems to have made G. K. C. assume practical liberation as following it. To what extent mediaeval life fell short of it is a matter of common (though not always exact) information. In any case, there is no denying the severe obstinacy of serfdom and the darker sides of feudalism, softened by Christianity, but practically not really liquidated until a later epoch. Some such concession on the part of the writer would have been necessary.

Apart from these, there are less sublime foundations of mediaeval freedom: in some cases the ignorance of the people of that epoch could be helpful [13]).

In some things, the mediaeval state was much less oppressive than the complicated modern machinery.

These points seem less controvertible than the preceding ones.

The West always joined a keen sense of personality to that of freedom. The mediaeval period of its history works out such embodiments of both those elements as the jury, the conception of *liber et legalis homo,* the economic protection of individual independence in the guilds.

c) A few words more specifically about the *person.* The maximum of possible insistence on the welfare of the soul is essentially declaratory of the care bestowed on the person, even

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13) It was the learned who promoted the Roman Law — partly an instrument of oppression — the common people built the Common Law.

if the latter term was comparatively less used. Chesterton show how some conditions favoured this personalism *avant la lettr* in mediaeval society: the type of work of the craftsman, th power and rootedness of small communities and local loyaltie private property (though unjustly distributed and too thinl spread). On the other hand, too little account is taken by hi of the great, sometimes crushing power of custom and convention characteristic of primitive communities, which in some way were certainly unfavourable to personalist development. The simpl fact of the limitation in the choice of a career must have warpe no end of vocations when the son of a serf had to remain a se and the daughter of a merchant so often could not marry „abov her station". This by way of example of the possible objection in this section.

d) G. K. C.'s book on Aquinas shows his understandin of the Thomistic rehabilitation of the body, that *essential* elemer of the human person. The victory of St. Thomas over the Manichee (under whatever shape) paved the way for a sound humanism In spheres of life less exalted than philosophy, this profoundl Christian respect for the rights of man's „lower half" was mor easily perceptible: thence probably Chesterton's appreciation fc the old, nay also mediaeval pastimes of the tavern: beer, goo food, human talk and companionship, dances on the green, lov of song and all the associations of Merry England [14]). For it i an epoch where that „mystical materialism" characteristic c Catholicism was strongly, if subconsciously, present in the mind and doings of the people. From the same source sprang the lov of symbol, heraldry, ritual, mummery and, highest of all, liturgy Deeply understood was the need of material „exteriorization" c inward experience. Naturally, the incompleteness of the Thomisti victory and the strength of the Augustinian trend have, conversely to be carefully born in mind. And one cannot forget the certai

[14]) *Fancies versus Fads*, p. 16/17.

amount of unnecessary self-torturing and unwholesome contempt for the flesh that must have gone along with the more sound and moderate asceticism.

e) Man's limitations were also at home in the epoch of small communities (but breeding sometimes great ideas [15]) and great art) [16]), and much more so, one would think, in the epoch of the small and almost homely Ptolemaic universe and of the narrow scope of material possibilities in comfort, communication etc. But whatever the extent of praise given by G. K. C. to particularism, one must ask: were such small frames always good? Was every parochialism full of the understanding that it was a part of a great European organism? Did there not very often go with it actual narrowness and ignorance? It is enough for the moment to realize that there must have been both possibilities.

f) That much more dramatic of man's limitations, the moral, was wisely borne in mind. „Middle Ages were great for they believed in the Fall of Man". Sin, original and individual, was recognized and called by its name, even if rampant. This precious feeling of unshaken ethical criteria made the innumerable anti-clerical satires sound and innocuous for the foundations of the system: monks were laughed at not because they were monks but because they were not monkish enough. Such recognition of mediaeval realism in its taking account of human imperfection remains valid under all circumstances. The objection arising here concerns rather the point whether the ethical criteria were really always so unshaken and the moral notions so uniform. How many curious local „adaptations" of the universal code were possible in this society often only half-emerging from the tribal stage! These observations will do by way of commentary on the truth (on the whole unquestionable) of the unity of moral outlook in the Middle Ages.

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15) Cfr. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill,* p. 75

16) *St. Francis of Assisi,* p. 49.

g) Similarly the next of the *Everlasting Man's* characteristics: the need of feelings was more at home in the epoch of Courtly Love. Contrasting e. g. the spontaneous and humble mediaeval Scots with their Calvinistic, overrationalized sons, G. K. C. speaks of „...mirth and pardon, of laughter and tears and truce" and of „...the kind and careless knights that rode with the heart of Bruce" [17].

Radically opposed to it in his eyes is not only the cold talk of predestination but the mechanized world of modern mass industry or Darwinist „pitiless" science (!). The human warmth of innumerable mediaeval taverns which was brought in a while ago in connection with man's body is here relevant with its powerful call on imaginations longing for „a time with a heart".

Here the necessary correction would consist in pointing out, first, that modern science has relieved a tremendous lot of human sufferings (e. g. in the medical field) progressing hand in hand with modern humanitarianism. If humanitarianism has often proved in some things shallow, naïve and „unhierarchical", similar drawbacks could be detected in mediaeval sentimental outgrowths. So what could resist criticism is not so much the contrasting of facts as of conceptions. The mediaeval conception of man in G. K. C.'s view afforded a better scope and deeper roots for human feelings, especially joy; and such conception of man as is implied in the schemes of modern science is indeed dry, to say the least.

h) The need of sacrifice which the „realists" of later times denied in man was consistently encouraged when his life was so often compared to a miniature Way of the Cross. Not only in this were the Middle Ages above utilitarianism: we spoke before of their interest in truth for truth's sake [18].

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[17] *The Queen of Seven Swords,* Sheed and Ward, 1946, p. 50.

[18] *What's Wrong with the World,* III, 10.

i) The real scope for sacrifice was thus offered by religion. It is viewed as the gigantic motor of activity in the mediaeval world, which in the life of St. Francis is shown in its most sublime form, the love of God, mobilizing man's whole energy [19]). From it flows all the spirit of social compassion of the friars and monks at their best, by it are marshalled people's aesthetic and intellectual endeavours. New truths are unfolded by it from old stores and used for the building of a full humanism [20]) where Man, reconciled to nature, faces her as his sister [21]). The essence of Christian philosophy ,thus developed, proves to be realistic and faithful to reality [22]); constructive, hopeful and preservative of values. Religion establishes also a stable hierarchy of values which in turn makes for a sunny atmosphere in life provided with a final aim and a glorious meaning [23]). There was in this life, notwithstanding the gloom of some aspects ,a lot of calm, Chesterton believes; and the absence of a constant, fierce competition makes it seem to have been viewed almost like a dance [24]).

Against the assets, presented by G. K. C., stand the heavy shortcomings of the concrete shape of mediaeval religion which have been the scandal of later times. It is not the easy objections (concerning e. g. superstitions which are perhaps an unavoidable accompaniment to religion in epochs culturally low) that are conspicuous here. Foremost among many difficulties seem to come to the mind the temporal claims of the representatives of the spiritual society which the Church is. The truer it is that the Church rightly defended the person from the encroachments of the State in questions spiritual, the greater the mistake of the Churchmen who obtruded upon the temporal sphere — an attitude

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19) *St. Francis of Assisi,* p. 14.
20) *St. Thomas Aquinas,* pp. 25, 34, 40—41.
21) *St. Francis of Assisi,* p. 38.
22) *St. Thomas Aquinas,* p. 212 ff.
23) *Chaucer and His Age,* p. 273 ff.
24) Ib., p. 149.

rejected by more modern Catholic conceptions. Chesterton knew that very well — perhaps he had no opportunity to discuss it. As to the eternal „why" in, Why has not Christianity succeeded better, we know his answer about the mediaeval city having only been outlined [25]). What remains after too short attempts is some great plan like that of the unfinished *Canterbury Tales* in *Chaucer and His Age,* with the difference that even the outline is now obliterated.

To this main answer would be subordinated the particular explanations which follow if one asks, in turn, where was the realization of this or that aspect of mediaeval religious humanism, since instead of it things often seemed at the best underdeveloped, nature viewed askance, etc.

5. Further characteristics of mediaeval civilization; its decline

Further review of the characteristics of the mediaeval era, as emphasized by Chesterton, may begin with a feature which again results from the basic humanistic interests, registered before: the democratic spirit.

This will be followed by a consideration of mediaeval objectivism and uniwersalism.

To G. K. C. democracy is the natural result of the tendency towards freedom and he believed that such a tendency resulted in no less a thing in some aspects of mediaeval life. What he accordingly claims is the existence of a democratic self-government in towns [26]). This or the kindred charitable interest in the plain man's dignity and rights was reflected in the democratic spirit of the first Franciscans [27]), in the growth of popular culture,

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[25]) *The New Jerusalem,* Chaptex XII.

[26]) *A Short History of England,* p. 86 ff

[27]) *Heretics,* p. 273.

especially art [28]), in the popular initiative [29]) in various movements, even in the popular alliance with the crown (where such could be found) against the magnates.

To what extent such theses may be accepted is a matter of special enquiry, applicable particularly in the case of the first chapters of *A Short History of England*. A number of G. K. C.'s statements interesting us here were formulated with regard to his own country, although, conversely, in many cases they were nevertheless meant to be true for all Europe. What one may say here is that however undeniable the trend, the fight which it had to carry on against the feudal set-up and the weight of a fast-growing plutocracy was so hard that its achievement must be limited to a moderately successful attempt.

Certain things in mediaeval economy flowed partly from the same regard for the ordinary man, partly from the objectivism of that civilization. Thus arose the protection of the poor and freedom, in guild legislation, was in a way saved by being qualified: a member's power could not grow beyond a certain limit — in this way the same limit was safeguarded for his neighbour.

Just as individuals are restricted in complete self-expansion, so are the nations in this pre-Renaissance Europe. This troublesome continent had not yet reached the fever of nationalism and something is recognized above the particular claims of nations. The leaders of the whole of Europe — as there exist such people — see unavoidably more of its problems than the rather „local" kings [30]). Thence the breadth of the crusading outlook. The unity of Europe is alive and it includes England — still far from her future insularity. Expecially intellectually the understanding between nations is flourishing. Except for the grave objection pointing to the inability of mediaeval Christians

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[28]) *The Humour of King Herod* in *The Uses of Diversity*.

[29]) *The Youle Log and the Democrat*, ib.

[30]) *St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 59.

to refrain from wars, we may leave unquestioned this praise of the superior unity of Western Christendom, which was certainly a great achievement.

But amazingly soon after those vital currents began to undermine the resistence of the more „reactionary" feudalism (in social and political matters) and augustinism (in philosophical and religious matters) the potential greatness of the mediaeval civilization received a few deadly blows.

The earliest of these was struck at the battle of El Hattin, in 1187; and with this failure of the crusades, G. K. C. believes, the heart of Western Christendom broke, no longer able to recover.

What came after it only availed itself of the enfeebled European organism: the Black Death in 1348 ruined it by half, and changing to a revolutionary extent the economic and social conditions, dealt another such blow.

The growth of nationalism, not sufficiently checked by the Popes [31]), was one more factor — and the end of the era drew near.

About the end of the mediaeval epoch many reservations have been made since the golden days of unqualified adoration of the change; among the reservations made by Chesterton may be mentioned the remark that the leading Christian principles remained (theoretically?) still largely the same in the sixteenth century, which proves their strength and sense. ,

Naturally ,many things did not remain the same and England in particular underwent an unprecedented social and economic transformation.

It may just as well be added at once that the process of this transformation was only partially completed in the sixteenth century and had a somewhat different character than the *Short*

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[31]) *The Resurrection of Rome*, p. 115—120.

History of England suggests, though the picture does have a lot of truth in it.

Chesterton is of course primarily interested in the religious transformation. If his views of the Reformation seem extreme, again one must bear in mind that they were a reaction against the extreme of many centuries' unreserved approval. If the views on Man and universe matter so furiously, as one sees G. K. C. discovering, it could not be indifferent what views triumphed with Luther, even if the triumph was accompanied by so many useful and important acquisitions and realizations like the overseas discoveries, the Revival of Learning etc. The essential thing would always be the question on what lines the Learning would be conducted and if its beginning included the public burning of Aquinas' works, it meant forsaking the sound solutions of the greatest schoolmen and the greatest Hellenes, their logic, their realism, their balance.

And since it was imperative that intellect should regain its place of preference if human dignity and human aims were to be safeguarded at all, hence appeals to logic and for logic recur in G. K. C.'s writings, at the cost of sounding antiquated, scholastic and un — English in his countrymen's ears.

From similar sources flowed the determination to carry out certain programmes, even if they sounded too revolutionary to some and too mediaeval to others: the Distributist League was meant to save certain values which in G. K. C.'s eyes deserved restoring.

So it was indifferent to G. K. C.'s thinking whether the programme of distributism struck people as up-to-date. It was supposed to help MAN. (In the quality of students of the programme and of its author, however, we may observe with interest that the ideal peasant of Chesterton's Distributist League does seem roughly equivalent to his of—defended peasant of the Middle Ages, just as his small tradesman to the mediaeval craftsman).

6. *Conclusion*

What shall we say then, finally, of Chesterton and the Middle Ages?

First let us cope with the simpler kind of critics who believe in unlimited admiration of the writer for this epoch. It is not difficult to show how far he would be from such position, how ready to admit not only mediaeval cruelty or primitivism but even the ultimate general failure of the great attempt to build a *Civitas Dei*. In his later years he formally, if not quite consistently, disclaimed such uncritical enthusiasm [32]).

No more however could we reduce the mediaevalist interests of G. K. C. to the purely aesthetizing attitude of a Rossetti. This attitude in Chesterton stands merely for one and not too considerable part of his emotional approach. It was present in the early works: *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Ballad of the White Horse,* though even there it was vastly different from e. g. the early creation of Morris.

All the time the philosophizing power of his mind was alive and strove — without taking this for its unique or primary task — to reach a picture of the Middle Ages on the background of the general human values we have surveyed. If those values could not be found there, not all the romance of the epoch could redeem this lack. If, on the contrary, they were there, he was ready to undertake their restoration.

The fault, if any, in the controversy, lies with the opponent, says G. K. C.: it was not because people like Chesterton started looking for phantoms: it was because their foes felt their own misery so acutely that even the memory of the long-forgotten past arose as a consolation — as the poem *„Mediaevalism"* puts it:

„We went not gathering ghosts; but the shriek of your shame
has arisen
Out of your own black Babel too loud; and it woke the dead"

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[32]) *The Resurrection of Rome,* p. 145.