IRENA KAŁUŻA

THE POETRY OF HILAIRE BELLOC

Four years ago, on July 17th, 1953, died one of the greatest champions of Catholicism in England, Hilaire Belloc. He was a pupil of Cardinal Newman and a friend of G. K. Chesterton, and had much in common with both of them. An ardent Catholic and a born pamphleteer, he conceived it his duty to write Catholic propaganda, thus neglecting strictly literary activities. His output was indeed varied and enormous in bulk, but rather slight in artistic merit. There was only one field where, having put aside his "message", he tried consciously to be an artist — and that was poetry. He called it modestly his "verse" and those few pieces he wrote he polished time and again with loving care. But under the self-imposed scheme of activities he could devote comparatively little time to poetry. Sometimes indeed, when his contemporaries seemed to take little heed of his mission, doubts would arise in his mind as to whether he had chosen the right way. So in a well-known poem he complains:

> England, to me that never have malingered,
> Nor spoken falsely, nor your flattery used,
> Nor even in my sightful garden lingered: —[1]
> What have you not refused?
> (*From Stanzas Written on the Battersea Bridge*)

It is not the aim of the present paper to decide whether

[1] „The line was often taken to mean that he ought to have remained in France, but he explained to F. J. Sheed that it did not mean that at all. It meant that he had deserted poetry for prose — 'because one fights with prose'." From *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* by Robert S p e a i g h t, Hollis & Carter, 1957, p. 108.

Belloc was right or wrong in his choice. The fact is that he contributed much to the Catholic revival which is at present taking place in England.

It is also very significant that two biographies have been published since his death (J. Morton, *Hilaire Belloc: A Memoir*, Robert Speaight, *Life of H. Belloc*). Both of them are written by Belloc's friends who wished to perpetuate the memory of his exuberant personality, already half legendary.

Thus Belloc is remembered as a Catholic apologist and as an interesting human being, while his poetry, in which he put such hopes, is being neglected. As far as I know, not a single comprehensive essay on the subject has been published.

The opinions of a number of critics range from highest praise expressed in very vague forms (Mac Donell) and genuine appreciation of detail (Renée Haynes) [2] to simply ignoring the subject (R. Hamilton) [3]. In his Introduction to a Belloc anthology Mac Donell says, "Reputations raise and fall... But I am not afraid to put it on record in this page, that I hold Mr H. Belloc to be the greatest master of English prose and poetry in our time" [4]. And here is another example of a highly favourable opinion, "It is possible that Belloc will be remembered for his poetry when all his historical works are forgotten save for a few passages of splendidly poetical prose... in one small but not unimportant branch of the art of versification he may well be counted supreme. In the whole range of English comic verse there is nothing better than *Cautionary Tales, More Peers* or *Bad Child's Book of Beasts*... Most satire dates so quickly that it soon loses its interest, but Belloc's comic verse is as dateless as the humour of Shakespeare" [5].

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[2] Renée Haynes, *Hilaire Belloc*, publ. for the B. C., Longmans 1953.

[3] Robert Hamilton, *Hilaire Belloc*, Douglas Organ, London 1945.

[4] *Belloc's Stories, Essays and Poems*, Everyman's Library, No 948, 1938.

[5] *Hilaire Belloc*, „The Times Literary Supplement", No 2867, Febr. 8, 1957.

COMIC AND GROTESQUE VERSE

It is obvious that this opinion refers almost entirely to Belloc's comic verse. And really it seems that the appreciation of his serious poetry was hindered by the enormous popularity of his comic and grotesque verse. It can really be classified as some of the best in England, along with the comic verse of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. It is known and quoted in England just as *Słówka* by Boy-Żeleński is known in this country. Originally meant for the young these pieces ironically reprimand naughty children and praise the well-behaving ones. They form a reaction against such "moral" authoresses for children as Jane and Anne Taylor, and though their verse is now completely forgotten, Belloc's satire on them is brilliantly alive.

SATIRES

Belloc wrote also quite a number of topical, political and social satires and epigrams, which became instantly popular thanks to their exuberance and ingenuity. Here are the famous *Lines to a Don* where he cleverly orchestrates his fits of passion,

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;
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.

This verbal extravaganza is very characteristic of what is generally imagined as "real Belloc". That the English language can be a very effective vehicle for word-play can be illustrated from various works from Shakespeare to A. A. Milne. Belloc is especially skilful at using rhymes with comic effect and enumeration of a crescendo character.

However, this paper does not set out to examine Belloc's comic and satirical verse in detail. Suffice it to remember that Belloc shows here great technical mastery.

The grotesque verse forms the first, easily approachable, section of Belloc's poetic production. Whoever goes further, will find the next one, namely poetry partly or wholly modelled on styles of various periods. It is no wonder that Belloc who was such a great connoisseur of West European culture (he was a historian by profession) and a judge of literature, began to call up echoes from the past in a century in whose artistic experiments he did not believe nor trust-to be honest — a century which he generally regarded as inferior to the past.

MEDIEVAL IMITATIONS

It is obvious that of all the epochs the Middle Ages appealed to Belloc most. As a historian he regarded it as the happiest period in the history of mankind, as a man he felt it was one with which he had deep affinities. His nature knew simplicity and humbleness, his mind understood the sharply opposed concepts of the joy of life and the vanity of human wishes, while his bearing was capable both of courtesy and broad exuberance. Moreover, the spirit of the English Middle Ages which he wanted to imitate, was the outcome of a fusion of the two cultures Belloc loved and understood; the French and the English. All these affinities and preferences greatly contributed to making Belloc's imitations sound genuine.

The class of Belloc's poetry which is being discussed may be represented by carols such as *Noël* with the jingling burden *Carillon — Carilla* reminding one of old French carols, by songs such as *The Ring,* and by short lyrical pictures such as *The Birds* and *Courtesy.* Let us look closer at *Courtesy* whose method of poetic expression is typical here.

> On Monks I did in Storrington fall,
> They took me straight into their Hall;
> I saw Three Pictures on a wall,
> And Courtesy was in them all.
> The first the Annuciation;
> The second the Visitation;
> The third the Consolation,
> Of God that was Our Lady's Son.

Then the poet presents three little pictures of courtesy in the persons of Archangel Gabriel, the Mother of God and the Child Jesus. The primitiveness of the very regular metre has much charm, and the simplicity and naiveté of the whole is enhanced by the author's own attitude: it brings to mind the humble and unnaturally small figure of the donor in the corner of a Gothic painting. In fact Belloc's poetic method here seems to consist in suggesting an atmosphere, a mood and a truth (a fragment of his vision of the world) which he wants to communicate to the reader by means of suggesting a picture.

A different world of medieval associations is created by a ballad like *The Little Serving Maid* reminding one of ancient English folk ballads (cf. the still popular *Barbara Allen*) with their primitive narration of love and death.

But Belloc's unique imitative talents are given fullest expression in the *Ballad of Val-ès-Dunes,* which brings to mind old English war ballads, such as the famous *Chevy Chase.* It sings the victory of the Norman Duke William (later William the Conqueror) won in his youth over the hostile feudal lords. In accordance with the manner of the authentic anonymous ballads, the events are reported in a fragmentary way, with precision of — sometimes unexpected — detail, but without perspective; the dialogue-sections are not very easy to follow as they lack con-

nective material. In the reader's mind these primitive touches form an impression that the ballad is a truly spontaneous creation of a troop of soldiers who wish to remember and to put on record the glorious events in which they have just participated.

With all that Belloc is not only an imitator. Keeping in general within the style of medieval ballads, he is to introduce some means of expression which are more particularly his own.

> The men that lived in Longuevaile
> Came out to fight by bands.
> They jangled all in welded mail,
> Their shields were rimmed of silver pale
> And blazoned like a church-vitrail:
> Their swords were in their hands.
> (*Stanza* 1)

Even if the opening lines do no more than recall the measured pace of a war ballad, those that follow are indeed notable. They suggest a picture composed of light and colour and accompanied by jangling sound, the elements of the vision being limited to various pieces of armament. All that gives the general effect of readiness for a battle. Used for a different purpose, the poet's method remains basically the same as in *Courtesy*.

In the *Ballad of Val-ès-Dunes* Belloc is also more than an imitator when versification is concerned. The authentic medieval ballads often have very regular, even monotonous, rhythm, which sometimes jerks unexpectedly for no other reason than the lack of skill of their primitive creators. Belloc adapts the popular ballad stanza to suit the situation. In *Stanza* VIII for instance, he shortens or lengthens the lines in order to put the key-word in the opening position and achieve the general effect of irregular spasmodic movement.

> As the broad ships out of Barbary
> Strike rock.
> And the stem shatters, and the sail slaps;
> Streaming seaward; and the taut shroud snaps,
> And the block
> Clatters to the deck of the wreck.
> So did the men of Longuevaile
> Take the shock.

In this stanza Belloc returns to the oldest English alliterative metre. Lines 3 and 4 consist of four stressed syllables each, while the number of unstressed syllables is immaterial; they are divided by a caesura into two sense groups linked by alliteration (s, sh, str sounds). Almost the same can be said of the opening sentence (lines 1 and 2, except that the alliteration pattern is b, sh, str) which really forms one line broken only in order to emphasize the words "strike rock" (observe also that thanks to it Belloc is able to keep closer to the normal pattern of the ballad stanza). Both the lengthening and shortening of lines as well as alliteration are used functionally to achieve the impression of clash and speed.

Thanks to Belloc's skill and perhaps thanks to associations with William the Conqueror and his epoch the *Ballad of Val-ès-Dunes* reminds us of the famous Bayeux tapestry with its lack of perspective, its sharp contour of lines and sea background of many scenes.

CLASSICIST IMITATIONS

Belloc's "original-imitative" powers were not limited to the Middle Ages. *Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine,* which is in a way his highest achievement, is rich in classical reminiscences. These are the use of mythology, Greek-Latin background of ideas, rhetoric and the heroic couplet, the stock metre of English classicist poetry (all these will be given fuller consideration in another section of the essay).

On the whole Belloc is able to use those means effectively, but there are some portions of the poem in which he fails hopelessly just because he keeps too closely to classical conventions which are not understood by the modern reader:

> ...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;
. . . . . .

RENAISSANCE IMITATIONS

Further we come across some sonnets which are frankly modelled on artificial sixteenth century diction. Sonnet IX is full of typically Renaissance "conceits" (in line 13 the author himself points to it) and the imitation is so consummate that even the rhymes go back to the sixteenth century pronunciation (prove, love).

That which is one they shear and make it twain
Who would Love's light and dark discriminate:
His pleasure is one essence with his pain,
Even his desire twin brother to his hate.
With him the foiled attempt is half achieving;
And being mastered, to be armed a lord;
And doubting every chance is still believing;
And losing all one's own is all reward.
I am acquainted with misfortune's fortune,
And better than herself her dowry know:
For she that is my fortune and misfortune,
Making me hapless, makes me happier so:
In which conceit, as older men may prove,
Lies manifest the very core of Love.

(*Sonnet* IX)

This is obviously an echo of Sidney. Each line forms a whole (there is no enjambement) and is composed of a thesis and its antithesis, both of them depicting the unexplained dual character of love. There is strict symmetry in sentence structure even when the parts of speech are concerned. The verbal trick of juxtaposing words similar in sound but contrasted in meaning (e. g. hapless happier; misfortune, fortune) reminds one of Shake-

speare (cf. *Sonet* XXI), but Shakespeare would never have written a sonnet strictly based on one figure and thus reminding us of an academic exercise as is the case with Belloc and sometimes with Sidney.

OTHER IMITATIONS

From among the later literary styles, we can find some imitations of a light eighteenth century pastoral:

> When I was not much older
> Than Cupid, but bolder
> I asked of his Mother in passing her bower
> What it was in their blindness
> Man asked of her kindness
> And she said it was naught but a delicate flower
> Such a delicate, delicate, delicate flower!
> (from *Strephon's Song*)

and some parodies of the pompous nineteenth century diction which tried to bring alive the spirit of the past by using artificial archaisms, but succeeded only in making itself ridiculous:

> Oh! ye that prink it to and fro,
> In pointed flounce and furbelow.
> What have ye known, what can ye know
> That have not seen the mustard grow?
> (from *The Yellow Mustard*)

BELLOC'S VISION OF THE WORLD

In the discussion of Belloc's imitative poetry, it was pointed out that he possessed a special genius which was able to express itself within the range of an accepted literary style. Let us now proceed to discuss that section of Belloc's poetry which, though usually traditional in form, is the expression of his own individuality and his outlook on life.

That part of his personality which made him a fighter found expression in Catholic apologetics; poetry which was intrinsically

his own, grew out of two contrasting qualities of his nature: boisterousness and melancholy. The lyrical sadness over the transiency of everything human is the recurrent motif of Belloc's thoughts. It was responsible for something like pessimism in his nature though this is in no way contradictory to his being a humourist at the same time; once more we have here the frequent phenomenon of a satirist who is also a pessimist, like Swift, or is prone to pessimism, like Evelyn Waugh. With Belloc it is not, we must remember, a pessimism based on a doctrine, doubting everything and destroying everything, but only an elegiac sadness felt more acutely when the world seemed to turn a deaf ear to his mission. Chesterton's opinion on the subject, very cautiously expressed, puts the problem in a nutshell: "In so far as mood and emotion have their legitimate place in life, his (Belloc's) mood and emotion are generally not optimistic enough"[6]. So it is not a conflict that we are witnessing, but rather the difficulty of adhering to the once-for-all accepted truths, as reflected in a very personal early *Sonnet* II:

I was like one that keeps the deck by night
  Bearing the tiller up against this breast;
I was like one whose soul is centred quite
  In holding course although so hardly prest,
And veers with veering shock now left now right,
  And strains his foothold still and still makes play
Of bending beams until the sacred light
  Shows him high lands and heralds up the day.

But now such busy work of battle past
I am like one whose barque at bar at last
Comes hardly heeling down the adventurous breeze;
And entering calmer seas,
I am like one that brings his merchandise
To Californian skies.

It is the section of Belloc's poetry now under discussion, which is undoubtedly most important. It consists of short lyrics, songs, sonnets and a longer *Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine*. Both in subject matter and form this poetry is mainly tradi-

[6] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*.

tional. Chesterton wrote once that a truly great poet is not afraid of tackling trite subjects because they are always true being really concerned with human nature, while modern poetasters make frantic efforts to find an "original" theme which will soon be dated. Thus Belloc keeps to the conventionally traditional subjects of poetry such as nature, love, beauty, joy and sorrow, and expresses them in a form which is on the whole traditional. His best poetry, just as his best prose, is permeated by the classical spirit of balance, objectivity and lucidity. In short, if his subject matter does not force him to experiment (as happens in *Tarantella*), Belloc does not seek for a new form, as he regards experimenting for its own sake as nonsense. It follows then that he is old-fashioned, preferring melody to harshness and an appeal to our senses to an appeal to our intellect. His poetry may be described as a lucid suggestion of mood or truth. Consequently when analysing those changing moods, we shall always find under them something of his outlook upon the world and this will be given fullest expression in *Heroic Poem.*

The curve of moods in Belloc's poetry starts with boisterous merriment, reaches quiet and solemn joy and sinks into exultant or melancholy meditation. It is characteristic for him that it opens with drinking songs and finishes with *Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine.*

Belloc's drinking songs are frolicsome and noisy. They must have contributed to the new attitude of the English towards the Catholics

> My jolly fat host with your face all a-grin,
> Come, open the door to us, let us come in
> A score of stout fellows who think it no sin
> If they toast till they're hoarse, and they drink till they spin
> Hoofed it amain,
> Rain or no rain
> To crack your old jokes, and your bottle to drain.
> (from *The Drinking Song on the Excellence of Burgundy Wine*)

Such songs were in strong contrast to late-Victorian Puritanism and presented a new picture of a Catholic: instead of a sleek, intriguing, narrow-minded conspirator, we have a jolly stout fellow enjoying wine and company, a kind of man that

Belloc really was at times (cf. Renée Haynes, *Hilaire Belloc*, p. 29).

Quiet and sober joy is expressed in very simple lyrics, where the brotherhood of mankind with nature brings to mind some Franciscan associations:

> The moon on the one hand, the dawn on the other:
> The moon is my sister, the dawn is my brother.
> The moon on my left and the dawn on my right.
> My brother, good morning, my sister, good night.
> (*The Early Morning*)

This little jingling tune is something which only Belloc could achieve.

The majestic *Sonnet* I with the recurrent "Lift up your hearts" *(Sursum corda)* records a more solemn mood of joy created by the landscape of the poet's beloved Sussex,

> Lift up your hearts in Gumber, laugh the Weald
> And you my mother the Valley of Arun sing.
> Here am I 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.

Elevated joy is given expression in *Sonnet* XIII praising Beauty which may purify the soul through Love:

> What are the names for Beauty? Who shall praise
> God's pledge he can fulfil His creatures' eyes?
> Or what strong words of what creative phrase
> Determine Beauty's title in the skies?
> But I will call you Beauty Personate,
> Ambasadorial Beauty, and again
> Beauty triumphant, Beauty in the Gate,
> Beauty salvation of the souls of men.

A definite change of mood is revealed in *Sonnet* XXIII, XXIV, XXV which deal with the sadness of Nature's decay in autumn. Then human life is compared to a short winter day:

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.
(*Sonnet* XV)

At last what remains of natural phenomena is death. Sleep, again treated in a Franciscan way, brings us nearer to death (*Sonnet* XXVI).

The feeling of the transciency of everything human is even more effectively conveyed when it comes like a harsh dissonance at the end of a joyous, capering poem like *Tarantella*. The contrast between the boisterous and the melancholy mood is the more remarkable as the poem is highly original. Based on the motifs of the South-European dance it admirably conveys the precise, sharp, rattling sound of the castanets, growing quicker and quicker and carrying away both the dancer and listener. This effect is undoubtedly well known in Spanish and Italian poetry where the very sound of the language helps to achieve it, but in English it is unique. To produce it Belloc uses rhymed lines (longer lines have also internal rhymes) of various length and groups them to get various musical movements. The intensity of rhythm is mainly due to the pattern of words he uses. They are either monosyllabic or polysyllabic with reduplicative sound elements (e. g. remember) and their sound value is enhanced by alliteration and onomatopoeia.

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 fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees,
And the wine that tasted of the tar?
. . . . . .
And the Hip! Hop! Hap!
Or 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 —

Then the dance is suddenly interrupted. Short, heavily accented lines, with massive words like "boom" and "doom" change the mood to the ominous foreboding of death:

Never more,
Miranda,
Never more.
. . . . . .
No sound:
But the boom
Of the far Waterfall like Doom.

Belloc's concept of life is given the fullest expression in *Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine,* which, leaving aside the technique of suggesting a mood, is really a poetic summa of the author's beliefs. It opens with an image of a Dionysian procession roaming through Europe to plant the wine. The meaning under it is Belloc's praise of the fullness of life and of Latin culture with its impulsiveness, art, logic and the mild climate of South European countries. This triumphant ode changes then into a prayer: the Wine, i. e. Sacramental Wine, is treated as the symbol of crossing in the state of Grace the boundary of physical death.

...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.

Formally the whole poem is notable for a clever use of classical conventions, especially of the heroic couplet and rhe-

toric (but compare the paragraph on classicist imitations). The flippant eighteenth century had used them mainly in satires and did it so well that they had become devalued and today often produce comic effect where dignity and elevation of style is meant [7].

Belloc purified the heroic couplet and deprived it of comic associations chiefly by a wide use of substitutions (he used even trisyllabic feet in the metre which is basically an iambic pentameter). This relieved the monotony of the metre and at the same time took away its agile sharpness so proper for a satire. It also endowed the metre with an air of solemn dignity, lost almost since Dryden used it in the seventeenth century.

In presenting the various moods suggested by Belloc's poems, it was often necessary to touch upon his outlook on life. His outlook is essentially a Catholic one. Beginning with the exultant and risky comparisons as:

> 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.
> (From *Heroic Poem*)

he proceeds to prove how vain are wordly achievements:

> Prince, may I venture (since it's only you)
> To speak discreetly of The Crucified?

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[7] Belloc himself was a master of this satirical style. Half a century ago he so praises *The Benefits of Electric Light*

> Hail, Happy Muse, and touch the tuneful string!
> The benefits conferred by Science I sing.
> Under the kind Examiners direction
> I only write about them in connection
> With benefits which the Electric Light
> Confers on us; especially at night.
> These are my theme, of these my song shall rise.
> My lofty head shall swell to strike the skies.
> And tears of hopeless love bedew the maide's eyes.
> Descend, O Muse, from thy divine abode,
> To Osney, on the Seven Bridges Road;
> For under Osney's solitary shade
> The bulk of the Electric Light is made.
> (From *Newdigate Poem*)

He was extremely unsuccessful too:
The Devil didn't like Him, and he died.
(*Ballade of Unsuccessful Men, Envoi*)

and finishes in a fuller concept of Catholic life in *Heroic Poem*. It follows then, that, though he wrote few poems on explicitly religious subjects [8], his serious poetry is Catholic in the sense of being based on Catholic view of life.

What is Belloc's place as an artist in the history of English poetry?

Since the artist must be taken on his own terms, it may be useful to see what his own ideas on the nature of poetry are. It is impossible to find any consistent theory, but a conception of poetry emerges out of his numerous writings. It is connected with the recurrent motif of mystery and supernatural longings of human nature and may be called Dionysian: "There is a mystical quality — that is, a quality not contradictory of reason but superior to it — inhabiting the right use of words... Upon the exactitude of that quality in use depended the magic of the poets" [9]. Neither the creative nor the communicative process in poetry can be examined. How the poet creates is a mystery to us, since it happens under a supernatural inspiration. What depends on him is not the choice of words but only the "right acceptance of them" [10]. Words properly used in poetry "illuminate not only what we are but what we might be and what we will be, and, above all, they raise echoes from beyond the world" [11].

This conception, based on the reflection in art of a higher supernatural truth, deprives the author of the title of creator and the critic of the name of scholar. It is of little use when making an assessment of poetry, but it is valuable for the right understanding of Belloc's poetry.

Characteristically enough, in Belloc's own critical work these ideas were rather neglected. As a literary critic he lacks a fixed

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[8] *Sonnet* XXI, *Ballade of Illegal Ornaments, Ballade of Our Lady of Częstochowa, Our Lord and Our Lady; Lady, Lady.*

[9] *On the Simplicity of Words*, from *On Anything*, p. 25.

[10] ibid.

[11] ibid.

aesthetic criterion by which to judge literature. If there is any consistent thesis underlying his criticism, it is a thesis of a historian rather than a man of letters: "Religion is at root of every culture and on the rise and fall of religions the great changes of society have depended" [15].

Thus *Avril,* a series of essays on French Renaissance poets, deals with the epoch when Europe in all its variety still formed a religious and cultural unity, while *"Milton"* dealing with the greatest genius of Puritan England, analyses his poetry against the background of religious controversy and, consequently, of expanding nationalism.

In practical criticism, on the other hand, Belloc is often admirable and shows himself as a poet knowing from experience the process of creation. What seems to be his working rule is, "lucidity in verse as in prose is the very soul of the matter" [13]. This is an astonishing statement, originating no doubt from his French interests and preferences, but it is helpful in approaching Belloc's own poetry.

The other factor to bear in mind is the date of the appearance of Belloc's *Sonnets and Verse* [14]. The collection appeared as early as 1895 and, though later he added an occasional poem or two, it did not change the character of the whole. Judging then by the period to which he belongs, Belloc is really a late Victorian, if a multi-styled poetry can be dated at all. It is more convenient, however, to classify him as a traditionalist, which he would have been even if he had been born half a century later. Therefore his poetry cannot be examined from the point of view of absolute originality of expression, we can only try to see to what tradition he belongs.

It seems to me that the division I. A. Richards introduces in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* [15] (Chapter XXXII, the *Ima-*

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[12] *Surrivals and New Arrivals,* p. 16.

[13] Hilaire Belloc, *Milton.*

[14] Hilaire Belloc, *Sonnets and Verse,* Duckworth 1923.

[15] I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, first publ. 1924.

gination) may be of much use here. According to him one kind of poetry is "poetry in which the imagination includes the opposite and discordant qualities of an experience, resolving the opponent discords and thus gaining a larger unity" [16]. It is characterised by a free (unpoetic) choice of subject matter, by the functional use of metaphor, by mixing the elevated and the vulgar and by colloquial (not conventionally poetic) language. According to English critics (Brooks, Isaacs) [17] it is here that the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama belong together with the seventeenth century metaphysical school and with modern poetry.

The second kind of poetry according to Richards, is "poetry which leaves out the opposite and discordant qualities of an experience, excluding them from a poem"[18]. Historically speaking such is the poetry of the Romantic and, above all, of the English classicist period. And such is, I think, the poetry of Belloc.

Its subjects are frankly poetic, the suggestion of moods is fully worked out, impressions are nicely and logically brought into order. Metaphor is often treated as a kind of ornament, for its own sake, rarely is it of such a nature as to illuminate the meaning directly. Similarly there is nothing in this poetry which according to T. S. Eliot must be "apprehended" even before it is "comprehended". Lucidity, even at the price of more direct communication is always aimed at. Common sense, balance and a feeling for measure permeate this poetry. According to the taste prevailing today these are not, to be sure, the central virtues of the greatest poetry. We are rather prone at present to appreciate that kind of poetry which tries to communicate experience in all its complexity. But if we are not unduly bent on the shock of novelty and directness, we should be able to appreciate Belloc's wide culture, command of style and variety of versification, all of which enabled him to use individual means

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[16] Quoted after Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry & Tradition, p. 50, P L Editions, London, 1948.

[17] Cleanth Brooks, op. cit.; J. Isaacs, *The Background of Modern Poetry, Based on the Broadcast Talks*, London, G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1951.

[18] Quoted after Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 50.

of expression within any chosen style with perfectly plausible effects [19].

As a traditionalist "with a difference" Belloc will certainly hold a special place in the history of English poetry.

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[19] It was only after the present paper had been written that Robert Speaight's *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* was made available to me and I was glad to find out that his opinions coincide with mine: "He [Belloc] had learnt, among other things, that his own way of writing verse would be the slow way, chiselling and refining until he had completed a nearly perfect thing. He did not set out to astonish, but to satisfy; classical rhythm rather than romantic surprise, melody rather than image would be his *forte*." p. 104.