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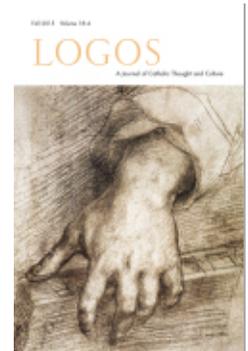
Between Life and Art: Hilaire Belloc's *The Path to Rome*

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Between Life and Art

Hilaire Belloc's *The Path to Rome*

IF AN AUTHOR'S IMPACT on English letters can be judged by the amount of critical literature devoted to his work, then the prospect for Hilaire Belloc is pretty dismal. The MLA International Bibliography lists only ten peer reviewed articles related to Belloc, more than half of which are over twenty years old, and not one of which deals with his most well-known work, *The Path to Rome*.¹ This book tells the story not, as the title would suggest, of a conversion to Catholicism, but of a journey Belloc made in June, 1901, during which he attempted to walk in a straight line from Toul, the commune situated in northeastern France where he served in the French military, to Rome. He solemnized the journey via vow, or rather, vows, to the effect that he would keep the same shoes the whole trip, sleep rough, hear Mass every morning, not take advantage of any wheeled thing, and arrive in Rome on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.² Over the course of the book, Belloc breaks all these vows save the "strict vow" of arriving in Rome on June 29 (*PR*, vi).

Few have ever commented explicitly on *The Path to Rome*. Those who have generally dismiss it as either a "travel book"³ or some kind

of “self-portrait.”⁴ Neither of these readings, however, does justice to the elements that make the book avant-garde. For instance, Belloc told American journalist Maria Lansdale that he envisioned *The Path to Rome* being “*décousu* and written anyhow of its essence.”⁵ *Décousu*, literally unstitched or incoherent, is a fairly apt description. With no chapter headings, no dates, over seventy pictures, songs, and scraps of verse, the narrative pace of the book keeps time with Belloc’s wandering feet. The peculiar stream of consciousness resulting from this approach foreshadows some of Belloc’s later modernist peers.⁶ Furthermore, Belloc’s use of the travel genre is similar to much later, post-modernist conventions.⁷

All of this is interesting, but the real greatness of *The Path to Rome* actually lies in its self-conscious medievalism. This is first referenced in a passage so obscure that many contemporary readers might miss it. In the preface, “Praise of this Book,” Belloc writes:

Rabelais! Master of all happy men! Are you sleeping there pressed into desecrated earth under the doss-house of the Rue St. Paul, or do you not rather drink cool wine in some elysian Chinon looking on the Vienne where it rises in Paradise? Are you sleeping or drinking that you will not lend us the staff of Friar John wherewith he slaughtered and bashed the invader of the vineyards, who are but a parable for the mincing pedants and bloodless thin-faced rogues of the world? (*PR*, vii)

Since Rabelais is not necessarily a household name to contemporary English speakers, this passage is confusing. A sixteenth-century French author, Rabelais was hugely influential in the development of French literature; in world literature he holds a place similar to Shakespeare or Cervantes.⁸ He is best known for the works Belloc alludes to in this passage, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, rollicking tales of bawdy giants and their grotesque adventures.⁹ What makes Belloc’s mention of Rabelais peculiarly interesting is that it suggests that the most fruitful way to understand *The Path to Rome* is to consider it as an example of carnivalesque, a medieval and early modern genre

described by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World*, published in English in 1965.

Background

For North Americans, the word “carnival” calls up images of seedy travelling fairs common to rural summertime.¹⁰ When Bakhtin chose the term, however, he was thinking of the European usage meaning “the season immediately preceding Lent, devoted in Italy and other Roman Catholic countries to revelry and riotous amusement.”¹¹ The Mardi Gras celebrations of the American South offer a dim reflection of the “morris-dances, sword-dances, wassailings, mock ceremonies of summer kings and queens and lords of misrule, mummings, disguising, masques . . . sports, games, show, and pageants” that made up carnival,¹² though in former times carnival happened much more often than once a year.¹³ This period of riotous amusement typically involved the violation of social norms; think, for instance, of Shakespeare’s *Rosalind*, that adventurous woman who decides to dress as a man and move into the forest of Arden. She excuses her strange wooing of Orlando as symptomatic of “a holiday humor.”¹⁴ Carnival, as Bakhtin uses the term, has more in common with a Shakespearian masque than a travelling circus.

Bakhtin writes that “Carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (*RW*, 8). In medieval and early-modern society, this life existed parallel to the workaday world. Its purpose was to exaggerate the shortcomings of daily civil and ecclesiastical life to the point of absurdity, and the incongruous picture that resulted was supposed to make people laugh, rather in the way that the distorted image of ourselves in a fun-house mirror makes us laugh. Everyone participated in this lighthearted mocking, and the laughter that it produced gave a momentary unity to all levels of society, regardless of age, caste, or profession (*RW*, 10). Carnival laughter allowed participants to see each other, however briefly, as nothing other than ridiculous fellow human beings.¹⁵ This brief moment of leveling gave

people a chance to see themselves and their world with new eyes, and was thus an instrument of societal renewal. Bakhtin argues that this potential for renewal is what made Rabelais's carnivalesque such a powerful literary force.¹⁶

Motives

This background on carnival is necessary because, though Belloc claims his motives were merely pecuniary, it seems more likely that he wrote *The Path to Rome* with an aim toward the kind of renewal offered by carnival.¹⁷ Consider the timing of the book: 1901 was not only the first year of a new century, it was also the year Queen Victoria died. Victoria's January 22 death left England in a strange position; on the one hand, the country had lost perhaps the greatest symbol of its identity and imperial power, but on the other, its citizens had an opportunity to look carefully at that identity and decide if it needed changing. Belloc confronted this situation by creating a secondary world akin to carnival, a textual space in which European readers could see their own foibles and prejudices hilariously magnified, and thus perhaps gain new eyes with which to see their historical circumstances. This was already an ambitious project, but what makes *The Path to Rome* especially daring is that it does not stop at inviting readers to laugh at themselves: it also proposes that the renewing power of this laughter is inexorably linked to the renewing power of the gospel. Ultimately, the carnivalesque project of *The Path to Rome* was an attempt to influence the future of Europe by returning it to its Christian past.

Cynics will point out that, if this was Belloc's project, then it appears to have been a resounding failure. Europe did not, in fact, return to its ancient faith, but rather embraced new ideologies that produced the bloodiest century in human history. However, though Belloc's book did not bring about a massive spiritual renewal, it nevertheless offered an alternative to the atheistic philosophies that were soon to take Europe by storm. Christian laughter certainly did not

become a major instrument of twentieth-century social change as a result of *The Path to Rome*, but that does not make Belloc's attempt fruitless. On the contrary, he blazed an important trail that we would do well to consider carefully as the twenty-first century progresses.

This careful consideration is what I propose to offer. Because *The Path to Rome* is self-consciously Rabelaisian, I will begin by discussing how Belloc's book manifests some of the elements of carnivalesque Bakhtin outlines in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*. Next, I will discuss Belloc in his role as the quintessential carnival fool, then consider how Belloc's choice to associate his pilgrimage with the feast of Corpus Christi reveals his underlying evangelical intention, and finally explain how carnivalesque is an inherently Christian genre.

The Conventions of Carnavalesque

Bakhtin lists three main conventions of carnival: various genres of billingsgate, comic verbal compositions, and ritual spectacles. Belloc makes use of each of these conventions in *The Path to Rome* (RW, 5). Billingsgate, that is, "curses, oaths, [and] popular blazons," is not a major feature of the book, but it occurs in *The Path to Rome* on two notable occasions. The first is when Belloc wanders into an inn and is mistaken for a Venetian enemy. When a local thug begins to swear at him, Belloc responds in kind. Since he does not, in fact, speak Italian, Belloc's attempt is a hysterical blend of French, Latin, and Italian sounds: "Advancing my face also into my insulter's I shouted, 'Dio Lardo! Dios di mi alma! Sanguinamento! Nombre di Dios! Che? Che vole? Non sono da Venezia io! Sono de Francia! Je m'en fiche da vestra Venezia! No se vede che no parlar vestra lingua Che sono forestiere?' and so forth" (PR, 182).¹⁸

The second instance occurs when Belloc is arrested as a tramp. Still encumbered by his lack of Italian, Belloc explains that he speaks Latin and French and asks to be taken to the nearest priest. The police refuse, taking him instead to the "Sindaco," or mayor, who speaks French. Belloc's response certainly qualifies as insulting: "I told him

in exact idiom that his policemen were fools, that his town was a rabbit-warren, and his prison was the only clean thing in it; that half-a-dozen telegrams to places I could indicate would show where I had passed; that I was a common tourist, not even an artist (as my sketch book showed), and that my cards gave my exact address and description" (*PR*, 191).

Fortunately for Belloc, the Sindaco does not actually speak French and, having caught the word "tourist," lets him go. In both of these cases, Belloc's abusive language is meant to be humiliating and mortifying, but it also revived and renewed Belloc's situation, saving him from a fight in the first instance, and jail in the second (*RW*, 16). Also, there is a scene of conviviality and rejoicing with the locals after both episodes that speaks to the sometimes regenerative power of abuse.

In addition to billingsgate, Bakhtin also considers "comic verbal compositions, in Latin or in the vernacular" to be a convention of carnivalesque (*RW*, 12). In the Middle Ages these compositions were usually parodies produced by the educated class, typically monks unable to participate directly in carnival. There are so many examples of this kind of thing in *The Path to Rome* that it is hard to choose among them. From the ringing strains of "Heretics all," (*PR*, 92) to the drama composed entirely of symbols (*PR*, 94), to the song about "huit francs et dix centimes, Tra la la, la la la," (*PR*, 145) the book is practically littered with erudite and witty verses. Two particularly notable examples include the oracle of the half-shaven head¹⁹ and the verses Belloc imagines for giant ox-horn glasses.²⁰

The greatest poem in the book is unquestionably the one that appears at the end under the outrageous title "Dithyrambic Epithalamium or Threnody" or, roughly, "Wildly Excited Wedding Song or Funeral Dirge" (*PR*, 250). The poem is such a brilliant précis of the entire book that it is tempting to linger over a close reading of the whole thing. However, I will merely point out the peculiarly interesting combination of the two images of wedding and funeral, birth and death. Belloc juxtaposes beginnings and endings throughout the book, discussing, for instance, the proper way to end a book as he

is in the process of beginning one (*PR*, 6). This, of course, hearkens again to the historical context of 1901, a time of both beginning and ending. Belloc appears to have a sense of this historical timeliness of his book, and this sense of timing is related to Bakhtin's most well-developed carnival convention: spectacle.

The term spectacle is slightly misleading; it implies, Bakhtin says, "footlights," that is, a separation between performer and audience (*RW*, 7). Such a separation was foreign to carnival; the whole point of the second world is that, unlike normal life, here everyone participates equally. What Bakhtin means the word to signify is "a peculiar logic of the 'inside out,' of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, or numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings" (*RW*, 11). This shifty showmanship is the heart of carnival's identity. Though a written text like *The Path to Rome* is inherently non-visual, it can still participate in the kind of topsy-turvydom of spectacle by the way it uses various textual and narrative features, and Belloc's book is possessed of some particularly vivid narrative shiftiness. This shiftiness is related chiefly to Belloc's engagement with his implied reader (a term used by literary critics to indicate the kind of reader to whom an author addresses a text), and his use of embedded narrative.

Belloc's implied reader, Lector, is actually a character in the book who periodically interrupts the text in order to complain, question, or tell stories of his own. This is a fairly sophisticated narrative technique. By shifting the implied reader from outside the story to inside the story, Belloc is creating what literary critics call "metalepsis," that is, a violation of the boundaries between worlds. In this case the violation is of the border between the story world and the real world. It is as though Belloc reaches up out of the book, grabs his reader by the collar, and pulls him into the text. According to William Nells, a violation of this kind "always produces effects of some consequence."²¹ In the case of Lector, it seems clear that Belloc's intention is to ironize himself and draw his reader's attention to the

artificiality of the text in hand. Almost every time the Lector enters the narrative, he makes a comment about the book itself. Consider the following typical interruption:

The next morning with daylight I continued the road to Lucca, and of that also I will say nothing.

LECTOR: Why on earth did you write this book?

AUCTOR: For my amusement.

LECTOR: And why do you suppose I got it?

AUCTOR: I cannot conceive. . . (*PR*, 214)

Passages of authorial ironization like this effectively remind the reader that he or she is engaged in the act of reading, something it seems odd for a book to do, but that is entirely consonant with the self-reflection and renewal produced by carnival.

If Lector draws attention to the constructed nature of the book, so too does Belloc's complex use of embedded narrative. When Belloc gets to "a bit of road about which there is nothing to say," he tells a story to take up the textual time that he spends walking, causing his reader to linger over the stretch of road in parallel with his own feet (*PR*, 95). One marked example of this occurs when Lector and Belloc trade stories during a boring stretch of road. This takes up nearly five pages and he then picks up the narrative fourteen miles later at the next notable point on his journey. Belloc apparently means to create a textual path paralleling the literal path to Rome. While this makes the book strangely mimetic, at the same time it also draws attention to the artificiality of the book. At one point Belloc commands Lector to "Turn to page 95" and read the promise he made to "tell a story or sing a song" when next the road became boring, highlighting at once both his desire to have his walk and his text run in tandem, and his desire to draw attention to his text as an artificial object (*PR*, 221, 95). Belloc seems aware that "narrative embedding has the paradoxical effect of producing the illusion of a more profound realism . . . but also of undercutting that illusion at the same time."²² The effect of this is precisely the same one intended by carnival: by

being tricked into realizing that we are engaged in an act of reading, we ourselves receive that act back with fresh eyes and experience a kind of renewal.

What Belloc is using here is a kind of defamiliarization or “making strange.”²³ This occurs whenever something familiar is seen from an angle that makes it momentarily unrecognizable. When the familiar object or action is recognized for what it is we experience the simultaneous joy of familiarity and strangeness, just like Chesterton’s English yachtsman who sails off on an adventure and, through faulty navigation, ends up discovering the wild foreign country of England.²⁴ In Belloc’s case, this making strange rekindles the pleasure of reading.

Delightful as this is, Belloc’s interesting narrative choices offer an even greater potential for renewal. Critic Brian Richardson points out that when an author uses “repeated self-reference” it draws attention both “to the story that is told, and to the story of its telling.”²⁵ This does not sound particularly important, but Gerard Genette argues that books structured in this way create “the unacceptable and insistent hypothesis . . . that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative.”²⁶ It is exactly here that Belloc’s narrative project meets his project of preaching the gospel because, of course, Christians do not see the narrated nature of life as a hypothesis, but a fact. We do belong to a narrative: God’s narrative. If self-consciously textual texts remind readers that they are part of a story, then they also imply the presence of some Master Storyteller. *The Path to Rome* uses defamiliarizing narrative techniques that not only renew the act of reading, but also implicitly preach the presence of a Divine Narrator.

The Pilgrim Fool

Another aspect of Belloc’s book that reminds readers of their storied existence is pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are recognized symbols “of that longer, more complete journey which every soul must choose to

undertake”: the journey toward God.²⁷ This status as symbol means that pilgrimages are simultaneously literal and figurative since the physical journey also has a spiritual symbolism. The pilgrims who take such journeys occupy a kind of liminal space. This in-between existence makes the pilgrim reminiscent of professional carriers of carnival: clowns. Bakhtin points out that, far from being merely ridiculous, medieval clowns were a sort of strange professional class who “remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance” and not just during the holiday season (*RW*, 8). By invading the workaday world with the images of carnival, fools, like pilgrims, “stood on the borderline between life and art” (*ibid.*).

Belloc’s book provides a wonderful medium for a clownish pilgrimage existence: as clowns remained clowns always, even outside of the carnival season, so too the Belloc present in the book *The Path to Rome* is the same to every reader of the book in every age. The pilgrim Belloc, present in his constructed form in the narrative, on a road to Rome both consciously mimetic and consciously artificial, occupies the same borderland between life and art as clowns. This borderline existence may seem strange, but it comes along with a peculiar liberty: the liberty to speak the truth. It is commonly the case that the truth, especially the truth about ourselves, is too bitter a pill to swallow gracefully. Because fools are part of a world that we are not meant to take altogether seriously, they generally have the ability to point out our faults and foibles in a way that is non-threatening. Consider, for instance, Belloc’s aside on the good man who can bestow blessings:

There is the good man, whose goodness makes him of himself a giver of blessings. His power is not conferred or of office, but is *inhaerens persona*; part of the stuff of his mind. This kind can confer the solemn benediction, or *Benedictio major*, if they choose; but besides this their every kind thought, word, or action is a *Benedictio generalis* and even their frowns, curses, angry looks and irritable gestures may be called *Benedictiones minores vel incerti*. I believe I am within the definitions. I avoid

heresy. All this is sound theology. I do not smell of the faggot. And this kind of Benedictory Power is the fount or type or natural origin, as it were, of all others. (*PR*, 83)

The hilarity stems from the way Belloc magnifies the kind of over-seriousness to which everyday life is all too prone.²⁸ If we are guilty of this kind of gravity, Belloc's tirade can help us learn to take ourselves more lightly. As he says at the end of his introduction, "Then let us love one another and laugh. Time passes, and we shall soon laugh no longer—and meanwhile common living is a burden, and earnest men are at siege upon us all around. Let us suffer absurdities, for that is only to suffer one another" (*PR*, viii).

Timing is Everything

The Path to Rome clearly manifests Bakhtin's three main traits of carnival, and Belloc appears to have cast himself in the role of the carnival fool, but there is yet another way in which the book is carnivalesque. Bakhtin says, "The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness" (*RW*, 9). Belloc's book was related to time in both ways. I have already discussed the historical implications of 1901, but it is important to note that Belloc himself thought Victoria's death left England in "difficult circumstances" and that it was every Englishman's "business to recreate within our civic life, and to perpetuate in our political tradition, the spirit which she lent us in her maturity."²⁹ Here Belloc is clearly advocating a project of renewal that looks toward the past for inspiration.

The Path to Rome appears to be an attempt to put this project into action. This is evident in the way in which Belloc subtly subverts the conventions his modernist contemporaries applied to travel literature. In her 2011 book, *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys*, Alexandra Peat claims that by bringing "characters to new places" modernist authors also bring them "face to face with

the past” in such a way that the “past is not simply remembered; it is transformed by virtue of being re-enacted.”³⁰ Peat argues that this re-enactment is an attempt to “make it new,” in Pound’s famous phrase. The modernist pilgrim offers homage to the sacred ideal of newness by remaking the past they have rejected into an image of the present. Belloc’s pilgrimage “to see all Europe which the Christian faith has saved,” on the other hand, is exactly the inverse of this project: he wanted to form the present in the image of the past (*PR*, v). This is evident in his stated reason for going on pilgrimage: the sight of

the old tumble-down and gaping church, that I love more than mother-church herself, all scraped, white, rebuilt, noble and new, as though it had been finished yesterday. . . . I entered, and there saw that all within was as new, accurate, and excellent as the outer part; and this pleased me as much as though a fortune had been left to us all; for one’s native place is the shell of one’s soul, and one’s church is the kernel of that nut. (*Ibid.*)

Note that, though Belloc’s church had been made new, it was not because its past had been rejected. Quite the contrary: the church was made new in the image of the old. Even the statue of Our Lady that Belloc finds in the church is, though brand new to the place, yet formed by the ancient spirit of his valley. Belloc’s move, like the modernists, is toward newness, but for him it is essential that this newness be in continuity with the past. Belloc’s message seems to be that the past is not the burden that the modernists suppose, but rather a gift we unwrap in the present.

In addition to historic timeliness, Belloc’s carnival of *The Path to Rome* is also linked to a liturgical feast. Though there is some confusion regarding the precise time Belloc left, he certainly left sometime either on or around the feast of Corpus Christi, a Catholic feast traditionally celebrated with a procession of the Blessed Sacrament.³¹ Early in his journey when Belloc encounters “a pleasant woman of middle age” in an inn in Ballon d’Alsace on the evening of

Corpus Christi, he inserts a long parenthesis that may explain why he thought this departure time was a good choice:

yet she also was a Catholic—(she had a little tree set up before her door for the Corpus Christi: see what religion is, that makes people of utterly different races understand each other; for when I saw that tree I knew precisely where I stood. So once all we Europeans understood each other, but now we are divided by the worst malignancies of nations and classes, and a man does not so much love his own nation as hate his neighbors, and even the twilight of chivalry is mixed up with a detestable patronage of the poor. But as I was saying—) she also was a Catholic, and I knew myself to be with friends. (*PR*, 54)

Belloc clearly sees the Catholic faith, here represented by the feast day, as creating a kind of level playing field. In the light of the faith, as in that of carnival, all men are equal because all men are equally created in the image of God.

The equality that the faith gives to men is undoubtedly important to Belloc, but his choice of the feast of Corpus Christi indicates a further, and more profound, tendency toward carnival leveling. Remember that Corpus Christi involves a procession of the Blessed Sacrament. From Belloc's point of view, this means that God himself, present in the Eucharist, was walking through the street when he began his pilgrimage.³² He does not say this explicitly, but he implies that his straight line to Rome was hallowed by a divine visitation. The road accordingly becomes a great equalizer where not only Belloc, the German woman, and the other people he meets on his travels become equal, but where all of these people are, in some way, made equal to God.

If this sounds scandalous, it is supposed to. First of all, scandal is one of the purposes of carnival. Brian Richardson points out, correctly, that "Rabelaisian mockery" is most often directed at "the highly serious, the sacrosanct, the revered, and of all species of sacred cow."³³ Since this is the case, it makes sense that Belloc's text should

scandalize. However, carnival scandal is merely a tool of carnival leveling, and Belloc is leveling God and man. It might seem surprising for Belloc to make this claim, however implicitly, but the scandalous idea that God could be equal to men does not originate in Belloc, it comes from the folly of the Incarnation as presented in the gospels.

Christ and Carnival

In Scripture, Christ is repeatedly presented as someone who subverts expectations. He simply refuses to act the way that the Messiah should. For one thing, he does not fast, he feasts: "And they said to him, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.' And Jesus said to them, 'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.'"³⁴ Neither does Christ respect the code of the temple; he literally "overturned [the] tables" of the money lenders, men who, theoretically, are in the temple for a holy purpose: to keep it free of profane Roman coins.³⁵ All of this made Christ a problem, with the result that "he came to his own home, and his own people received him not."³⁶ Even after the Resurrection, Christ continues to use this trope of making strange, on several occasions, most notably on the road to Emmaus.

While the two disciples were walking, "Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him."³⁷ In this hidden guise, Christ enters into discussion with them. The two men explain that they are mourning the tragic crucifixion of the man they "had hoped . . . was the one to redeem Israel."³⁸ It is clear that they understand neither the Cross nor the Resurrection; a condemned criminal was not the Messiah they had envisioned. Christ reproves them, calling them "foolish," and then, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets," he explains his mission to them.³⁹ It is this exposition of the past that sets their hearts burning in the present, and Christ is eventually made known to them through an ac-

tion of his they had seen before: "the breaking of the bread."⁴⁰ Christ could have revealed himself to these men right away, but he chose to make himself strange and keep them in suspense so that he could both explain and console. Christians have always understood that Christ's purpose in subverting expectations was to regenerate, to fulfill the old law and, finally, to "make all things new."⁴¹ The carnival mode appeals to Belloc, as it does to all Christian writers, because its power for renewal has the most perfect exemplar possible: God.

By beginning his pilgrimage on Corpus Christi, the feast when God himself walks in the street, Belloc establishes the path to Rome as a space similar to that created by medieval carnival. It is a world full of laughter, but laughter that is ambivalent, laughter in which all, including God, participate. *The Path to Rome* literally puts everyone—readers, narrator, and God alike—on equal footing; it makes each an object of laughter, true, but it also makes each laugh.

The fact that this leveling laughter is supposed to include God explains some of the seemingly irreverent or superstitious passages in the book, such as when Belloc parenthetically describes the Corpus Christi Mass, saying "(the Mass was low and short—they are a Christian people)" or when he mentions that he saw a priest, adding another parenthesis "(it was lucky I did not see him first. Anyhow, I touched iron at once, to wit, a key in my pocket)," or when Lector, in an uncharacteristically witty move, explains the number of priests at Mass in a small French town by saying, "it was the season of the year, and they were swarming" (*PR*, 48, 130, 59). Here again Belloc is using his status as fool to speak the truth to his readers. Which of us has not occasionally been grateful for a short Mass? Or indulged in a meaningless superstition? Or compared a group of people to insects? Belloc's foolery reveals that all of us are hiding a tiny bit of irreverence, really. This is, perhaps, an uncomfortable realization, but these are such basic tendencies of the human condition (except, perhaps, the one about the insects) that all of us are probably equally uncomfortable. This discomfort exposes our innate silliness, but it also, in carnival fashion, creates an equal playing field. All of this keeps us

from taking the everyday world too seriously and again gives us the opportunity to laugh at ourselves, an entirely salutary occupation.

Europe and the Faith

I have said that Belloc's book is not about a conversion to Catholicism, but that is slightly misleading. His description of the evening at Undervelier clearly recounts a moment in which he embraces Catholicism and all its implications. As Belloc sits on a stone wall with a cigar, he sees all the people of the village going to Church for evening prayer (*PR*, 88). As described, the event is currently happening, but it is also looks like a scene straight out of the Middle Ages; the present in the image of the past once again.⁴² Belloc says that his "mind was taken up and transfigured," by the sight (*ibid.*). He goes on, "I saw for a moment the Catholic Church quite plain, and I remembered Europe, and the centuries" (*ibid.*). Here the literal pilgrimage Belloc is on also becomes a symbol both of his own personal journey and the journey of Europe. "Yes," Belloc says, "certainly religion is as tragic as first love, and drags us out into the void away from our dear homes" (*PR*, 90). By causing us to go, as it were, on pilgrimage, religion offers us the opportunity to set aside a space for laughter, a space that will renew our daily lives. This is the invitation Belloc seems to be offering his contemporaries, an invitation to embrace their Christian past, not reject it. As he famously says, "it is a good thing to have loved one woman from a child, and it is a good thing not to have to return to the Faith" (*ibid.*).

All of this explains the striking spiritual heft of *The Path to Rome*. When Belloc's descriptions combine the terror and exultation of the sublime, he can be quite eloquent:

These, the great Alps, seen thus, link one in some way to one's immortality. Nor is it possible to convey, or even to suggest, those few fifty miles, and those few thousand feet; there is something more. Let me put it thus: that from the height of Weissenstein I saw, as it were, my religion. I mean, humil-

ity, the fear of death, the terror of height and of distance, the glory of God, the infinite potentiality of reception whence springs that divine thirst of the soul; my aspiration also towards completion, and my confidence in the dual destiny. For I know that we laughers have a gross cousinship with the most high, and it is this contrast and perpetual quarrel which feeds a spring of merriment in the soul of a sane man. (*PR*, 101)

Not only is this a clear manifestation of carnivalesque leveling between God and man, but according to Belloc's grandson Dom Philip Jeb, it "mark[s] its author as a genuine mystic."⁴³

Conclusions

G. K. Chesterton said that *The Path to Rome* was "written recklessly."⁴⁴ Belloc reinforced this view when he wrote to E. S. P. Haynes in September, 1901, "This *Path to Rome* is a jolly book to write. No research, no bother, no style, no anything. I just write straight ahead as fast as I can and stick in all that comes into my head."⁴⁵ There is little wonder that the result of this method is a somewhat jumbled hodgepodge, but then, so was the Europe Belloc set out to portray. Belloc's long description and drawing of the church in Epinal, which "belongs to every imaginable period and is built anyhow, in twenty styles, but stands as a whole a most enduring record of past forms and of what has pleased the changing mind when it has attempted to worship in stone," is the perfect figure of European culture: varied, mismatched, and ancient (*PR*, 35). If Belloc's approach is at times uncomfortable and confusing, it is also inspired. "I shall write down whatever occurs to me to write," he wrote in a letter describing the book, "it will be as the spirit moves me."⁴⁶

The spirit evidently moved Belloc in a direction designed, through various textual and narrative features, to invite his peers to return to their Christian roots. Since Belloc is often berated for being pedantic, some may take umbrage at my choice of the word "invite." However, *The Path to Rome* is anything but authoritarian. True, it is

colored by Belloc's (strong!) opinions about Catholicism, but his arrival in Rome happens off stage; the book is only about the journey, the path.⁴⁷ Belloc certainly gets there, but it is up to each individual Lector to decide if they, too, have arrived in Rome, and all that the name encompasses in regards to culture and religion. Belloc offers an invitation, surely, but, in the end, it is only an invitation. He has shown his readers the shell of the European soul, but it is up to each individual to find the kernel of the nut (*PR*, v).

I do not pretend to have presented a thorough treatment of Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque; such was not my intention. My first aim was to show, through this reading of *The Path to Rome*, that carnival is a useful paradigm for approaching works of popular literature.⁴⁸ More importantly, though, my aim has been to suggest the peculiar fit between carnivalesque and Christianity. Belloc can be scandalous and seemingly irreverent and can get under the skin of his readers in a most annoying way, but then, so could a certain carpenter from Galilee. If Belloc, like the gospel, makes us uncomfortable, it is more indicative of something in the reader than in the text. In the case of *The Path to Rome*, carnivalesque allowed Belloc to become something of a St. Francis, that is, a fool God sent to rebuild his Church at a particular moment of history. He may not have been successful, but his attempt was valiant. We moderns have trouble understanding the topsy-turvy world of carnival because we, apparently, would much rather laugh at someone else than at ourselves; we would rather cut someone down to size than admit our own smallness. The great success of *The Path to Rome* is that it offers an alternative to the dark world of satire that has embraced so much of our modern literature.

Why didn't Belloc's vision of carnival make a lasting mark on Christian literature? Ultimately, his great flaw is that, rather than carnivalizing some of the darker moments in Church history, say the Inquisition or anti-Semitism, he simply ignores them. His unwillingness to confront these issues can make him seem pedantic and defensive and, in fact, goes against the spirit of carnival.⁴⁹ *The Path to Rome*

shows that carnival has the power to preach the gospel, but it also shows how this power is limited by our capacity for self-criticism. If we Catholics are going to carnivalize ourselves, we must be fearless in exposing dark and troubled places in our past.⁵⁰ We cannot preach conversion if we are unwilling to acknowledge our own need for it.

This is the difficult lesson of *The Path to Rome*, but there is also a lighter one. In the end, the book gives us space to laugh at ourselves, each other, and God. Indeed, Belloc's Christian understanding of carnival reveals a remarkable kinship between laughter and God. When laughter is ambivalent it causes men to see both their neighbor's foolishness and their own; they see that all men are inherently, if not equally, foolish, and this unity in diversity brings joy. Christian laughter cuts, certainly, but it cuts in the mode of a surgeon's knife, cutting in order to heal. It gives men, for a moment, a small sense of the way that God sees them: beings generally filled with self-importance and seriousness who are nevertheless absurdly contingent, fragile, and helpless creatures. When we are able to see ourselves with God's eyes, we learn that our rituals, hierarchies, castes, careers, and solemnities are not what give us our dignity, but rather the fact that we are all creatures who bring a smile to the face of God. And this, Belloc implies, should bring a smile to our face as well.

Notes

1. As of July 17, 2014. By contrast, there are over 4,500 peer reviewed articles listed concerning James Joyce.
2. Hilaire Belloc, *The Path to Rome* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), v–vi. (Hereafter in the text as *PR*.)
3. Peter Francis Browne, *Rambling on the Road to Rome* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), 3. Browne's book is based on his 1990 attempt to recreate Belloc's walk.
4. A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc: A Biography* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), 103–04.
5. Robert Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957), 156–57.
6. Though no one would call Belloc a modernist, he falls right in the middle of the modernist period, which ran "roughly from 1880 to 1950." (Alexandra Peat, *Travel And Modernist Literature: Sacred And Ethical Journeys* [New York: Routledge, 2011], 3). Stream

of consciousness was a phrase first used in 1890 by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*. By the 1920s it had come to refer to a common mode of modernist writing. For a full discussion of the history of the term, see M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 9th edition (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 298.

7. In her 2000 book, *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature*, Alison Russell sets out to discuss what she calls “emergent practices” in postmodern travel literature, tagging “solitary and individual journeys,” “challenging means and methods of moving through familiar terrain,” and “more difficult routes” as characteristics of postmodern travel literature (4, 6, 9). Since Belloc set out on his solitary jaunt on the straight line to Rome in 1901 and published his book in 1902, the idea that these practices are “emergent” in the year 2000 is problematic, unless the emergence took an entire century. See Alison Russell, *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), 2. (Hereafter in the text as *RW*.)
9. Brian Richardson, “Antimimetic, Unnatural, and Postmodern Narrative Theory,” *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 24.
10. “Carnival, n.,” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, accessed June 19, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/view/Entry/28104?redirectedFrom=carnival>. See definition two for the North American usage.
11. *Ibid.*
12. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s festive comedy: A study of dramatic form and its relation to social custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3.
13. For instance, “Candlemas, Shrove Tuesday, Hocktide, May Day, Whitsuntide, Midsummer Eve, Harvest-home, Halloween, and the twelve days of the Christmas season ending with Twelfth Night,” Barber, *Shakespeare’s festive comedy*, 4.
14. William Shakespeare, “As You Like It,” *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 391, IV.i.69.
15. Chesterton also speaks of the unifying power of laughter in his book, *The Common Man*:

Laughter has something in it in common with the ancient winds of faith and inspiration; it unfreezes pride and unwinds secrecy; it makes men forget themselves in the presence of something greater than themselves; something (as the common phrase goes about a joke) that they cannot resist. The saint is he who enjoys good things and refuses them. The prig is he who despises good things and enjoys them. But when he hears a really good thing, which he really enjoys, then he can no longer despise it. On that awful and apocalyptic occasion, he does not smile; he laughs. G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 158–59
16. Readers interested in a more elaborate description should read all of Bakhtin’s introduction to *Rabelais and His World*.

17. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 103.
 18. Belloc provides no translation.
 19. “Matutinus adest ubi Vesper, et accipiens te Saepe recusatum voces intelligit hospes Rusticus ignotas notas, ac flumina tellus Occupat—In sancto tum, tum, stans Aede caveto Tonsuram Hirsuti Capitis, via namque pedestrem Ferrea praeveniens cursum, peregrine, laborem Pro pietate tuâ inceptum frustratur, amore Antiqui Ritus alto sub Numine Romae.

LECTOR. What Hoggish great Participles!

AUCTOR. Well, well, you see it was but a rustic oracle at 9 3/4 d. the revelation, and even that is supposing silver at par. Let us translate it for the vulgar:

When early morning seems but eve And they that still refuse receive: When speech unknown men understand; And floods are crossed upon dry land. Within the Sacred Walls beware The Shaven Head that boasts of Hair, For when the road attains the rail The Pilgrim's great attempt shall fail! (PR, 160).

20. “I determined when I got to Rome to buy two such horns, and to bring them to England and have them mounted for drinking horns—great drinking horns, a yard deep—and to get an engraver to engrave a motto for each. On the first I would have—

King Alfred was in Wantage born He drank out of a ram's horn. Here is a better man than he, Who drinks deeper, as you see.

Thus my friends drinking out of it should lift up their hearts and no longer be oppressed with humility. But on the second I determined for a rousing Latin thing, such as men shouted round camp fires in the year 888 or thereabouts; so, the imagination fairly set going and taking wood-cock's flight, snipe-fashion, zigzag and devil-may-care-for-the-rules, this seemed to suit me—

Salve, cornu cornuum! Cornutorum vis Boûm. Munus excellent Deûm! Gregis o praesidium! Sitis desiderium! Dignum cornuum cornu Romae memor salve tu! Tibi cornuum cornuto—

LECTOR. That means nothing.

AUCTOR. Shut up! *Tibi cornuum cornuto Tibi clamo, te saluto Salve cornu cornuum! Fortunatam da Domunt!* (PR, 229).

21. William Nelles, “Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative,” *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frame*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 347.
 22. *Ibid.*, 349.
 23. For an excellent discussion of the Christian nature of this trope see, Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).
 24. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 13:

What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again? What could be better than to have all the fun of discovering South Africa without the disgusting necessity of landing there? What could be more

- glorious than to brace one's self up to discover New South Wales and then realize, with a gush of happy tears, that it was really old South Wales?
25. Brian Richardson, "The Nature of Narrative," *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 176.
 26. Quoted in Nelles, "Stories within Stories," 351.
 27. Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700–1500* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 246.
 28. Belloc's speech is also familiarly recognizable as clownish. Consider, for instance, Touchstone in *As You Like It*: "O sir, we quarrel in print, by the book—as you have books for good manners: I will name you the degrees. The first, the Retort Courteous; the second, the Quip Modest; the third, the Reply Churlish; the fourth, the Reproof Valiant; the fifth, the Countercheck Quarrelsome; the sixth, the Lie with Circumstance; the seventh, the Lie Direct. All these you may avoid but the Lie Direct; and you may avoid that too, with an If," Shakespeare, "As You Like It," V.iv.90–98.
 29. In Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, 153.
 30. Peat, *Travel And Modernist Literature*, 8.
 31. Robert Speaight claims that Belloc left Toul on the evening of Thursday, June 6, the Feast of Corpus Christi. Speaight explicitly notes that "the date of Belloc's departure from Toul is taken from the evidence of his letters at the time, not from *The Path to Rome*" (158n). Joseph Pearce claims the same departure date and, since everyone agrees that Belloc arrived in Rome on June 29, says that the pilgrimage took "22 exhausting days" (81). There are two problems here. First, in the book, Belloc explicitly says, "Devil take me! It is Corpus Christi and my third day out!" (*PR*, 48). Since Corpus Christi was on June 6, this implies that Belloc left Toul on the evening of Monday, June 3. Second, a careful structural analysis of the book reveals that the trip took 27 days, which, counting backwards from a June 29 arrival, lines up perfectly with a June 3 departure. Speaight and Pearce both cite the dates of Belloc's letters to back up their claim, so this means that either Belloc dated his letters incorrectly, or the book is not, in fact, a literal account of his pilgrimage.
 32. Belloc elaborates on this belief in *Europe and the Faith*:

Before His death this Man Who was also God had instituted a certain rite and Mystery called the Eucharist. He took bread and wine and changed them into His Body and Blood. He ordered this rite to be continued. The central act of worship of the Christian Church was therefore a consecration of bread and wine by priests in the presence of the initiated and baptized Christian body of the locality. The bread and wine so consecrated were certainly called (universally) the Body of the Lord," Belloc, *Europe and the Faith*, 43.
 33. Richardson, "Nature of Narrative," 177.
 34. Lk 3:33–35 (All scriptural citations are from the *Revised Standard Version*).
 35. Jn 2:15.
 36. Jn 1:11.
 37. Lk 24:15–16.

38. Lk 24:21.
39. Lk 24:25, 27.
40. Lk 24:32, 35.
41. Rev 21:5.
42. Incidentally, Belloc says that they were going to Vespers, but the hymn he quotes, *Te Lucis Ante Terminum*, is, in fact, from the night office of Compline.
43. Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 83.
44. In Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, 161.
45. Ibid.
46. Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, 157.
47. Fr. James Schall has recently written that "*The Path to Rome* is . . . not about Rome but about getting there through a Europe that reflects Rome, Empire and Church, at every step," James Schall, *Remembering Belloc* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2013), 30.
48. Though the book is perhaps not widely known enough to merit the title "popular," A. N. Wilson points out that *The Path to Rome* was "by far the most 'successful' book, in financial terms, that [Belloc] ever wrote" (Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, 103). Bakhtin claims that Rabelais was more "democratic" than Shakespeare or Cervantes because of his essential link to "popular sources" (*RW*, 2). He insists that the "radically popular character" of Rabelais's images made his works "nonliterary," that is, out of sync with the literary canons of his time (*ibid*). Having seen the depth a Bakhtinian reading adds to *The Path to Rome*, I suspect that the same kind of reading might be fruitfully applied to other popular, "nonliterary" works like Tolkien's Middle-earth, or Lewis's Narnia, or even Wodehouse's Edwardian England. Carnival could potentially problematize a too-easy categorization of many works dismissed as easily from the world of serious literature as *The Path to Rome*. If popular works are, by virtue of being popular, essentially related to the renewing power of carnivalesque, this might explain the peculiar, and to some *literati*, troubling persistence of popular literature.
49. Much of Bakhtin's work is focused on Rabelais's use of the grotesque, and so the absence of anything of the kind in *The Path to Rome* is a glaring omission.
50. Biographer Robert Speaight tagged Belloc's restraint as the major failing of the book. "Rabelais is too evidently at the author's elbow, and Belloc, though he had all, and even too much, of Rabelais's heartiness, lacked the imagination and the large, contemptuous anarchy of the French master. He was restrained by the decencies and conventions both of his time and his upbringing," Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, 163.