

Waugh on Kipling and Mexico: March 1964 and Pre-War 1939

--Epigraphs--

“All know there is **no solution in parliamentary democracy** [for the alleged “nations” or “larger political aggregates” of Africa in 1959]. But, ironically enough, the British Empire is being **dissolved on the alien principles** which we ourselves imported, **of nineteenth-century Liberalism**. The **foundations** of Empire [like the European Union today?] are often occasions of woe; **their dismemberment, always.**” (Evelyn Waugh, *A Tourist in Africa* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), pp. 156-157—my emphasis added)

“**Liberalism is the ideology of Western suicide**. When once this initial and final sentence is understood, everything about liberalism—the beliefs, emotions and values associated with it, the nature of its enchantment, its practical record, and its future—falls into place. Implicitly, all of this book is merely an amplification of this sentence.” (James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (New York: The John Day Company, 1964), p. 297—my emphasis added; see also p.26, the first mention of the theme.)

“The Austro-Hungarian Empire fell [in 1918] because **the component peoples** were **urged** to attribute their ills to **thwarted nationalism**. No one, I suppose, in their **former dominions** [has now] had a **happier** or **better** life [in 1960] **as a result of 'self-determination,'** though Czechs and Croats and Magyars were **enormously more civilized in 1918** than the native nations of Africa today [in 1960].” (Evelyn Waugh, *A Tourist in Africa* (1960), p. 157—my emphasis added)

In March of 1964, two years before he was himself to die on Easter Sunday of 1966 (10 April), Evelyn Waugh wrote a moving review of two books touching upon the poet Rudyard Kipling, who had died in January of 1936, only six months before G.K. Chesterton himself, on 14 June 1936.

When treating of “the heart of Kipling's character,” Waugh was also to speak about the difficulty of founding and protecting and sustaining a civilization. (Those familiar with Virgil's great Latin Epic,

The Aeneid, will also recall that theme and its special accent as it applied to the foundation of Rome.) Waugh also touched upon this recurrent matter of a precarious and threatened civilization in 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, in his book *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson*.¹

In his 22 March 1964 book review, Waugh says this by way of conclusion:

This judgment [*i.e.*, the incipient insight by one of the writers, N. Annan] **goes to the heart of Kipling's character. He was conservative in the sense that he believed civilization to be something laboriously achieved which was only precariously defended. He wanted to see the defenses fully manned and he hated the liberals** [also the “Limps”—the “Liberal Imperialists”!] **because he thought them gullible and feeble, believing in the easy perfectibility of man and ready to abandon the work of centuries** [as in the Catholic Church and vestigial Christendom today] **for sentimental qualms** [such as, for example, those false, seductive, and negligently slothful corruptions of Mercy].²

As Dr. Samuel Johnson often used to say, from the *Dies Irae*: “*Tantus Labor Non Sit Cassus.*” (“May so much labor, so much suffering, not be in vain”!)

Waugh's following and last paragraph about Kipling takes us even further into this atmosphere of poignancy and elegy, and it also shows the deeper appreciative heart of Evelyn Waugh himself, as we have unforgettably seen in his own work on Saint Helena — in his historical novel simply entitled *Helena* — his favorite work and the only one he ever read aloud to his own children. With Hilaire Belloc also in mind, by way of contrast, Waugh now says:

Kipling had no religion. Christianity had been shown to him in a repulsive form and he rejected it for life. The God of the Old Testament, Allah, Mithras, the [Kabbalistic-Freemasonic] Architect of the Universe, even Christ, **blunder vaguely into his narrative as convenient myths.** He seems to have known little of Hinduism. Most of his 'natives' are Mohammedan. **The Christian Incarnation and the Redemption did not exist for him as positive facts.** He seems sometimes to have believed, sometimes not, in some form of personal immortality. **A great many artists have suffered this deprivation and survived, aesthetically. Not Kipling.** He wanted **divine sanction** for his 'Law,' he wanted to participate in symbolic ceremonies, he clung to **the conception of a sacred text.** **He had affinities with Belloc** [Hilaire Belloc]—**superficially in his love of France and Sussex, technically in his rollicking meters, deeper in his scorn of politicians and his regard for private and public honour. But he lacked**

1 Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1939). For a more accessible text, see also Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh Abroad: Collected Travel Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf—Everyman's Library #266, 2003). This is the text which shall be used and referenced in this essay. *Robbery Under Law* is to be found in its entirety on pages 713-917.

2 Evelyn Waugh, “The Light That Did Not Wholly Fail,” in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh —Edited by Donat Gallagher* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983, 1984), p. 625—my emphasis added. The essay itself is to be found on pages 622-625.

Belloc's Faith and that was a primary need in him that he disastrously failed to satisfy.³

Before Waugh will speak of the meaning of “a conservative,” in relation to the defense of a civilization and its indispensable traditions, he will remind us of what he said at the beginning of his 1939 book on Mexico, *Robbery Under Law*. In his “Postscript: The Object and the Lesson,” he says: “At the beginning of this book I suggested that the present condition of Mexico [as of 1938-1939] had a world wide significance.” (913) He then makes differentiated comments on its geographical position, its financial position, and its political position (913-914). He also says: “Nor does the danger remain local....It is in small countries, not in large ones, that world wars start; **particularly in heterogeneous states** like Mexico.” (914—emphasis added) Moreover,

There is **the simple cautionary tale of the origin and consequences of Mexico's decadence....Every marked step in her decline, in fact, has corresponded with an experiment towards “the Left.” The reasons for her decline have been primarily moral**; the majority of her [modern] rulers have not been men of good will and their aims have been purely material; **if one starts by assuming** that the only real good of which man is capable is **the enjoyment of consumable goods**—and that has been **the assumption of the “Left” for a hundred years**—it is a very easy step [especially for our selfish, fallen human nature]—logically an inevitable step—to accumulate goods exclusively for oneself. **Altruism does not flourish long without religion**. The rulers of [modern] Mexico have almost all started by **denying the primary hypothesis of just government**. (915-917—my emphasis added)

These summary comments by Waugh above have now prepared us to consider the larger history of Mexico's political culture. For, adds Waugh, “there has been no true conservatism in Mexico.” (917)

Waugh's elucidations might also now help the current Pope Francis with his promiscuous, undefined ecclesiastical uses of some his ambiguous, though pejorative, categories such as “Conservative” and “Ultra-Conservative.” For, Waugh helpfully explains:

A conservative is **not merely** an obstructionist who wishes to **resist the introduction of novelties** [even papal novelties]; nor is he, as was assumed by most nineteenth-century parliamentarians, **a brake to frivolous experiment** [especially, as in the Church, “**an experiment towards 'the Left'**” (916)]. **He [the conservative] has positive work to do**, whose value is particularly emphasized by the [unmistakably decadent] plight of Mexico [as of 1938-1939]. Civilization has **no force** of its own **beyond what is given it from within**. It is **under constant assault** and it takes most of the energies of civilized man to keep going at all. There are criminal ideas and a criminal class in every nation and the first

³ *Ibid.*—my emphasis added.

action of every revolution, figuratively and literally, is to open the prisons. **Barbarism is never finally defeated**; given **propitious** circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly, will commit every conceivable atrocity. The danger does not come merely from habitual hooligans; **we are all potential recruits for anarchy**. Unremitting effort is needed to keep men living together at peace; **there is only a margin of energy left for experiment however beneficent**. Once **the prisons of the mind** are opened, **the orgy is on**. There is no more agreeable position than that of a dissident from a stable society. There are all the solid advantages of other people's creation and preservation, and all the fun [as a satirist?] of detecting hypocrisies and inconsistencies. There are times when dissidents are not only enviable but valuable. The work of preserving a society is sometimes onerous, sometimes almost effortless. **The more elaborate the society, the more vulnerable it is to attack** [and perfidious subversion, also inside the Church?], **and the more complete its collapse in case of defeat**. At a time like the present [just before World War II] it [society as well as culture] is **precarious**. **If it falls we shall see** not merely the dissolution of a few joint-stock corporations, but **[the dissolution] of the spiritual and material achievements of our history**. There is nothing, except ourselves, to stop our own countries [*sub Gratia Divina*] becoming like Mexico [especially now, in 2016, with its own drugs and migrations]. **That is the moral, for us, of her decay**. (917—my emphasis added)

By the criteria and standards of this passage, the Catholic Church and Western Europe, in general, are dangerously prone to dissolution or decomposition by virtue of the vertiginous rate of “change” and “the itch for innovation,” and a condescending dismissal of the Sacred Tradition and the slowly fruitful Cultural Traditions of the Christian West. Apostasy has consequences, even when it is subtly concealed. And it cannot be fittingly resisted by flippant and demeaning mockeries and travesties in the formal leadership.

“Without authority there is no life” (“*Sine auctoritate, nulla vita*”). But, one of our great Catholic challenges may be put in a polite question: “How does one resist the corruptions of authority, even of papal authority, without thereby subverting the principle of authority?”

For, “we are in the Church Militant, not the Church Milquetoast” — in the words of the faithful and affectionate and plucky Father Vincent P. (“Pete”) Miceli, S.J. Moreover, as it seems, “Barbarism is never finally defeated” in this world. The Christian Soldier must — like the combative and learned King Alfred the Great himself in Chesterton's *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911) — recurrently return to the Combat in this world, and grow up also thereby into Spiritual Childhood. What an Adventure, dear Lord and dear Lady! “**Tantus Labor Non Sit Cassus.**”

In his 1919-1920 4-page Introduction to the English translation of the Old French Epic, *The Song*

of *Roland* — published very soon after World War I — G.K. Chesterton said the following elegiac words:

The high note of the forlorn hope, of a host at bay and a battle against odds without end, is the note on which the great French epic ends. I know nothing more moving in poetry than that strange and unexpected ending....The poem ends, as it were **with a vision and vista of wars against the barbarians; and the vision is true. For that war is never ended, which defends the sanity of the world against all the stark anarchies and rending negations which rage against it for ever. That war is never finished in this world; and the grass has hardly grown on the graves of our own friends who fell in it** [in World War I, to include Chesterton's own beloved brother, Cecil].⁴

“**Tantus Labor Non Sit Cassus**”

CODA

Let us now consider a passage that was written **before** World War I: a similar vision coming from G.K. Chesterton's **earlier 1911 narrative-verse composition**, *The Ballad of the White Horse*. This vision is to be found in Book VIII, the last book of the Ballad: **The Vision of King Alfred the Great of England, circa 878 A.D. For, Alfred had therein said: “I have a vision, and I know the heathen shall return....Know ye the old barbarian, [for] the barbarian[s] come again.”**

“But dark and thick as thronged the host,
With drum and torch and blade,
The **still-eyed** King [Alfred] sat **pondering**,
As one that watches **a live thing**,
The scoured chalk [the carved and sculpted “White Horse”]; and he said,

"Though I give this land [as a Dowry] to Our Lady,
That helped me in Athelney,
Though lordlier trees and lustier sod
And happier hills hath no flesh trod [in Sussex]
Than **the garden of the Mother of God**
Between Thames side and the sea,

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, “Introduction” (pp. ix-xii) to *The Song of Roland*—Done into English, in the Original Measure by Charles Scott Moncrieff (London: Chapman & Hall, LTD., 1920—second impression; first printed in 1919), p. xii—my emphasis added .

"I know that weeds shall grow in it

Faster than men can burn;

And **though** they [the enemy host] scatter now and go,

In some far century, **sad and slow**,

I have a vision, and I know

The heathen shall return.

"They shall not come with warships,

They shall not waste with brands,

But **books** be all their eating,

And **ink** be on their hands.

"Not with the humour of hunters

Or savage skill in war,

But **ordering all things with dead words**,

Strings shall they make of beasts and birds,

And wheels of wind and star.

"They shall come **mild as monkish clerks**,

With **many a scroll and pen**;

And backward [nostalgically] shall ye turn and gaze,

Desiring one of Alfred's days,

When pagans still were men.

"The dear sun dwarfed of dreadful suns,

Like fiercer flowers on stalk,

Earth lost and little like a pea

In high heaven's towering forestry,

—**These be the small weeds ye shall see**

Crawl, covering the chalk [the "White Horse"]

"But though they bridge St. Mary's sea,
Or steal St. Michael's wing—
Though they rear marvels over us,
Greater than great [poet] Vergilius
Wrought for the Roman king [*The Aeneid*];

"By this sign you shall know them,
The **breaking** of the sword [of honour],
And man no more a free knight,
That loves or hates his lord.

"Yea, **this shall be the sign of them,**
The sign of the dying fire;
And Man made like a half-wit,
That knows not of his sire.

"What **though** they come with scroll and pen,
And grave as a shaven clerk,
By this sign you shall know them,
That they ruin and make dark;

"By all men bound to Nothing,
Being slaves without a lord,
By one blind idiot world obeyed,
Too blind to be abhorred;

"By **terror** and the **cruel tales**
Of **curse** in bone and kin,
By weird **and weakness winning,**
Accursed from the beginning,
By detail of the sinning,

And denial of the sin;

"By thought a **crawling ruin**,
By life a **leaping mire**,
By a broken heart in the breast of the world,
And the end of the world's desire [Our Blessed Lady];

"By God and man **dishonoured**,
By death and life **made vain**,
Know ye the old barbarian,
The barbarian come again—

"When is great talk of trend and tide,
And wisdom and destiny,
Hail that undying heathen
That is sadder than the sea.

"In what wise men shall smite him,
Or the Cross stand up again,
Or charity or chivalry,
My vision saith not; and I see
No more; **but now ride** doubtfully
To the battle of the plain."

(G.K. Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, Book VIII: lines 231-312) – my emphasis and brackets added)

--Finis--

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