

The Republican in the Ruins

The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone; especially to a wood-cut or a lithographic stone. Modern people put their trust in pictures, especially scientific pictures, as much as the most superstitious ever put it in religious pictures. They publish a portrait of the Missing Link as if he were the Missing Man, for whom the police are always advertising; for all the world as if the anthropoid had been photographed before he absconded. The scientific diagram may be a hypothesis; it may be a fancy; it may be a forgery. But it is always an idol in the true sense of an image; and an image in the true sense of a thing mastering the imagination and not the reason. The power of these talismanic pictures is almost hypnotic to modern humanity. We can never forget that we have seen a portrait of the Missing Link; though we should instantly detect the lapse of logic into superstition, if we were told that the old Greek agnostics had made a statue of the Unknown God. But there is a still stranger fashion in which we fall victims to the same trick of fancy. We accept in a blind and literal spirit, not only images of speculation, but even figures of speech. The nineteenth century prided itself on having lost its faith in myths, and proceeded to put all its faith in metaphors. It dismissed the old doctrines about the way of life and the light of the world; and then it proceeded to talk as if the light of truth were really and literally a light, that could be absorbed by merely opening our eyes; or as if the path of progress were really and truly a path, to be found by merely following our noses. Thus the purpose of God is an idea, true or false; but the purpose of Nature is merely a metaphor; for obviously if there is no God there is no purpose. Yet while men, by an imaginative instinct, spoke of the purpose of God with a grand agnosticism, as something too large to be seen, something reaching out to worlds and to eternities, they speak of the purpose of Nature in particular and practical problems of curing babies or cutting up rabbits. This power of the modern metaphor must be understood, by way of an introduction, if we are to understand one of the chief errors, at once evasive and pervasive, which perplex the problem of America.

America is always spoken of as a young nation; and whether or no this be a valuable and suggestive metaphor, very few people notice that it is a metaphor at all. If somebody said that a certain deserving charity had just gone into trousers, we should recognise that it was a figure of speech, and perhaps a rather surprising figure of speech. If somebody said that a daily paper had recently put its hair up, we should know it could only be a metaphor, and possibly a rather strained metaphor. Yet these phrases would mean the only thing that can possibly be meant by calling a corporate association of all sorts of people 'young'; that is, that a certain institution has only existed for a certain time. I am not now

denying that such a corporate nationality may happen to have a psychology comparatively analogous to the psychology of youth. I am not even denying that America has it. I am only pointing out, to begin with, that we must free ourselves from the talismanic tyranny of a metaphor which we do not recognise as a metaphor. Men realised that the old mystical doctrines were mystical; they do not realise that the new metaphors are metaphorical. They have some sort of hazy notion that American society must be growing, must be promising, must have the virtues of hope or the faults of ignorance, merely because it has only had a separate existence since the eighteenth century. And that is exactly like saying that a new chapel must be growing taller, or that a limited liability company will soon have its second teeth.

Now in truth this particular conception of American hopefulness would be anything but hopeful for America. If the argument really were, as it is still vaguely supposed to be, that America must have a long life before it, because it only started in the eighteenth century, we should find a very fatal answer by looking at the other political systems that did start in the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century was called the Age of Reason; and there is a very real sense in which the other systems were indeed started in a spirit of reason. But starting from reason has not saved them from ruin. If we survey the Europe of to-day with real clarity and historic comprehension, we shall see that it is precisely the most recent and the most rationalistic creations that have been ruined. The two great States which did most definitely and emphatically deserve to be called modern states were Prussia and Russia. There was no real Prussia before Frederick the Great; no real Russian Empire before Peter the Great. Both those innovators recognised themselves as rationalists bringing a new reason and order into an indeterminate barbarism; and doing for the barbarians what the barbarians could not do for themselves. They did not, like the kings of England or France or Spain or Scotland, inherit a sceptre that was the symbol of a historic and patriotic people. In this sense there was no Russia but only an Emperor of Russia. In this sense Prussia was a kingdom before it was a nation; if it ever was a nation. But anyhow both men were particularly modern in their whole mood and mind. They were modern to the extent of being not only anti-traditional, but almost anti-patriotic. Peter forced the science of the West on Russia to the regret of many Russians. Frederick talked the French of Voltaire and not the German of Luther. The two experiments were entirely in the spirit of Voltairean rationalism; they were built in broad daylight by men who believed in nothing but the light of common day; and already their day is done.

If then the promise of America were in the fact that she is one of the latest births of progress, we should point out that it is exactly the latest born that were the first to die. If in this sense she is praised as young, it may be answered that the young have died young, and have not lived to be old. And if this be confused with

the argument that she came in an age of clarity and scepticism, uncontaminated by old superstitions, it could still be retorted that the works of superstition have survived the works of scepticism. But the truth is, of course, that the real quality of America is much more subtle and complex than this; and is mixed not only of good and bad, and rational and mystical, but also of old and new. That is what makes the task of tracing the true proportions of American life so interesting and so impossible.

To begin with, such a metaphor is always as distracting as a mixed metaphor. It is a double-edged tool that cuts both ways; and consequently opposite ways. We use the same word 'young' to mean two opposite extremes. We mean something at an early stage of growth, and also something having the latest fruits of growth. We might call a commonwealth young if it conducted all its daily conversation by wireless telegraphy; meaning that it was progressive. But we might also call it young if it conducted all its industry with chipped flints; meaning that it was primitive. These two meanings of youth are hopelessly mixed up when the word is applied to America. But what is more curious, the two elements really are wildly entangled in America. America is in some ways what is called in advance of the times, and in some ways what is called behind the times; but it seems a little confusing to convey both notions by the same word.

On the one hand, Americans often are successful in the last inventions. And for that very reason they are often neglectful of the last but one. It is true of men in general, dealing with things in general, that while they are progressing in one thing, such as science, they are going back in another thing, such as art. What is less fully realised is that this is true even as between different methods of science. The perfection of wireless telegraphy might well be followed by the gross imperfection of wires. The very enthusiasm of American science brings this out very vividly. The telephone in New York works miracles all day long. Replies from remote places come as promptly as in a private talk; nobody cuts anybody off; nobody says, 'Sorry you've been troubled.' But then the postal service of New York does not work at all. At least I could never discover it working. Letters lingered in it for days and days, as in some wild village of the Pyrenees. When I asked a taxi-driver to drive me to a post-office, a look of far-off vision and adventure came into his eyes, and he said he had once heard of a post-office somewhere near West Ninety-Seventh Street. Men are not efficient in everything, but only in the fashionable thing. This may be a mark of the march of science; it does certainly in one sense deserve the description of youth. We can imagine a very young person forgetting the old toy in the excitement of a new one.

But on the other hand, American manners contain much that is called young in the contrary sense; in the sense of an earlier stage of history. There are whole patches and particular aspects that seem to me quite Early Victorian. I cannot

help having this sensation, for instance, about the arrangement for smoking in the railway carriages. There are no smoking carriages, as a rule; but a corner of each of the great cars is curtained off mysteriously, that a man may go behind the curtain and smoke. Nobody thinks of a woman doing so. It is regarded as a dark, bohemian, and almost brutally masculine indulgence; exactly as it was regarded by the dowagers in Thackeray's novels. Indeed, this is one of the many such cases in which extremes meet; the extremes of stuffy antiquity and cranky modernity. The American dowager is sorry that tobacco was ever introduced; and the American suffragette and social reformer is considering whether tobacco ought not to be abolished. The tone of American society suggests some sort of compromise, by which women will be allowed to smoke, but men forbidden to do so.

In one respect, however, America is very old indeed. In one respect America is more historic than England; I might almost say more archaeological than England. The record of one period of the past, morally remote and probably irrevocable, is there preserved in a more perfect form as a pagan city is preserved at Pompeii. In a more general sense, of course, it is easy to exaggerate the contrast as a mere contrast between the old world and the new. There is a superficial satire about the millionaire's daughter who has recently become the wife of an aristocrat; but there is a rather more subtle satire in the question of how long the aristocrat has been aristocratic. There is often much misplaced mockery of a marriage between an upstart's daughter and a decayed relic of feudalism; when it is really a marriage between an upstart's daughter and an upstart's grandson. The sentimental socialist often seems to admit the blue blood of the nobleman, even when he wants to shed it; just as he seems to admit the marvellous brains of the millionaire, even when he wants to blow them out. Unfortunately (in the interests of social science, of course) the sentimental socialist never does go so far as bloodshed or blowing out brains; otherwise the colour and quality of both blood and brains would probably be a disappointment to him. There are certainly more American families that really came over in the Mayflower than English families that really came over with the Conqueror; and an English county family clearly dating from the time of the Mayflower would be considered a very traditional and historic house. Nevertheless, there are ancient things in England, though the aristocracy is hardly one of them. There are buildings, there are institutions, there are even ideas in England which do preserve, as in a perfect pattern, some particular epoch of the past, and even of the remote past. A man could study the Middle Ages in Lincoln as well as in Rouen; in Canterbury as well as in Cologne. Even of the Renaissance the same is true, at least on the literary side; if Shakespeare was later he was also greater than Ronsard. But the point is that the spirit and philosophy of the periods were present in fullness and in freedom. The guildsmen were as Christian in England as they were anywhere; the poets were as pagan in England as they were

anywhere. Personally I do not admit that the men who served patrons were freer than those who served patron saints. But each fashion had its own kind of freedom; and the point is that the English, in each case, had the fullness of that kind of freedom. But there was another ideal of freedom which the English never had at all; or, anyhow, never expressed at all. There was another ideal, the soul of another epoch, round which we built no monuments and wrote no masterpieces. You will find no traces of it in England; but you will find them in America.

The thing I mean was the real religion of the eighteenth century. Its religion, in the more defined sense, was generally Deism, as in Robespierre or Jefferson. In the more general way of morals and atmosphere it was rather Stoicism, as in the suicide of Wolfe Tone. It had certain very noble and, as some would say, impossible ideals; as that a politician should be poor, and should be proud of being poor. It knew Latin; and therefore insisted on the strange fancy that the Republic should be a public thing. Its Republican simplicity was anything but a silly pose; unless all martyrdom is a silly pose. Even of the prigs and fanatics of the American and French Revolutions we can often say, as Stevenson said of an American, that 'thrift and courage glowed in him.' And its virtue and value for us is that it did remember the things we now most tend to forget; from the dignity of liberty to the danger of luxury. It did really believe in self-determination, in the self-determination of the self, as well as of the state. And its determination was really determined. In short, it believed in self-respect; and it is strictly true even of its rebels and regicides that they desired chiefly to be respectable. But there were in it the marks of religion as well as respectability; it had a creed; it had a crusade. Men died singing its songs; men starved rather than write against its principles. And its principles were liberty, equality, and fraternity, or the dogmas of the Declaration of Independence. This was the idea that redeemed the dreary negotiations of the eighteenth century; and there are still corners of Philadelphia or Boston or Baltimore where we can feel so suddenly in the silence its plain garb and formal manners, that the walking ghost of Jefferson would hardly surprise us.

There is not the ghost of such a thing in England. In England the real religion of the eighteenth century never found freedom or scope. It never cleared a space in which to build that cold and classic building called the Capitol. It never made elbow-room for that free if sometimes frigid figure called the Citizen.

In eighteenth-century England he was crowded out, partly perhaps by the relics of better things of the past, but largely at least by the presence of much worse things in the present. The worst things kept out the best things of the eighteenth century. The ground was occupied by legal fictions; by a godless Erastian church and a powerless Hanoverian king. Its realities were an aristocracy of Regency dandies, in costumes made to match Brighton Pavilion; a paganism not frigid but

florid. It was a touch of this aristocratic waste in Fox that prevented that great man from being a glorious exception. It is therefore well for us to realise that there is something in history which we did not experience; and therefore probably something in Americans that we do not understand. There was this idealism at the very beginning of their individualism. There was a note of heroic publicity and honourable poverty which lingers in the very name of Cincinnati.

But I have another and special reason for noting this historical fact; the fact that we English never made anything upon the model of a capitol, while we can match anybody with the model of a cathedral. It is far from improbable that the latter model may again be a working model. For I have myself felt, naturally and for a long time, a warm sympathy with both those past ideals, which seem to some so incompatible. I have felt the attraction of the red cap as well as the red cross, of the Marseillaise as well as the Magnificat. And even when they were in furious conflict I have never altogether lost my sympathy for either. But in the conflict between the Republic^[1] and the Church, the point often made against the Church seems to me much more of a point against the Republic. It is emphatically the Republic and not the Church that I venerate as something beautiful but belonging to the past. In fact I feel exactly the same sort of sad respect for the republican ideal that many mid-Victorian free-thinkers felt for the religious ideal. The most sincere poets of that period were largely divided between those who insisted, like Arnold and Clough, that Christianity might be a ruin, but after all it must be treated as a picturesque ruin; and those, like Swinburne, who insisted that it might be a picturesque ruin, but after all it must be treated as a ruin. But surely their own pagan temple of political liberty is now much more of a ruin than the other; and I fancy I am one of the few who still take off their hats in that ruined temple. That is why I went about looking for the fading traces of that lost cause, in the old-world atmosphere of the new world.

But I do not, as a fact, feel that the cathedral is a ruin; I doubt if I should feel it even if I wished to lay it in ruins. I doubt if Mr. M'Cabe really thinks that Catholicism is dying, though he might deceive himself into saying so. Nobody could be naturally moved to say that the crowded cathedral of St. Patrick in New York was a ruin, or even that the unfinished Anglo-Catholic cathedral at Washington was a ruin, though it is not yet a church; or that there is anything lost or lingering about the splendid and spirited Gothic churches springing up under the inspiration of Mr. Cram of Boston. As a matter of feeling, as a matter of fact, as a matter quite apart from theory or opinion, it is not in the religious centres that we now have the feeling of something beautiful but receding, of something loved but lost. It is exactly in the spaces cleared and levelled by America for the large and sober religion of the eighteenth century; it is where an old house in Philadelphia contains an old picture of Franklin, or where the men of Maryland raised above their city the first monument of Washington. It is there

that I feel like one who treads alone some banquet hall deserted, whose lights are fled, whose garlands dead, and all save he departed. It is then that I feel as if I were the last Republican.

But when I say that the Republic of the Age of Reason is now a ruin, I should rather say that at its best it is a ruin. At its worst it has collapsed into a death-trap or is rotting like a dunghill. What is the real Republic of our day as distinct from the ideal Republic of our fathers, but a heap of corrupt capitalism crawling with worms; with those parasites, the professional politicians? I was re-reading Swinburne's bitter but not ignoble poem, 'Before a Crucifix,' in which he bids Christ, or the ecclesiastical image of Christ, stand out of the way of the onward march of a political idealism represented by United Italy or the French Republic. I was struck by the strange and ironic exactitude with which every taunt he flings at the degradation of the old divine ideal would now fit the degradation of his own human ideal. The time has already come when we can ask his Goddess of Liberty, as represented by the actual Liberals, 'Have you filled full men's starved-out souls; have you brought freedom on the earth?' For every engine in which these old free-thinkers firmly and confidently trusted has itself become an engine of oppression and even of class oppression. Its free parliament has become an oligarchy. Its free press has become a monopoly. If the pure Church has been corrupted in the course of two thousand years, what about the pure Republic that has rotted into a filthy plutocracy in less than a hundred?

O, hidden face of man, wherever The years have woven a viewless veil,
If thou wert verily man's lover What did thy love or blood avail? Thy blood
the priests make poison of; And in gold shekels coin thy love.

Which has most to do with shekels to-day, the priests or the politicians? Can we say in any special sense nowadays that clergymen, as such, make a poison out of the blood of the martyrs? Can we say it in anything like the real sense, in which we do say that yellow journalists make a poison out of the blood of the soldiers?

But I understand how Swinburne felt when confronted by the image of the carven Christ, and, perplexed by the contrast between its claims and its consequences, he said his strange farewell to it, hastily indeed, but not without regret, not even really without respect. I felt the same myself when I looked for the last time on the Statue of Liberty.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] In the conclusion of this chapter I mean by the Republic not merely the American Republic, but the whole modern representative system, as in France or even in England.