

V

THE POLITICAL WRITINGS OF DANTE

THE political writings of Dante may be briefly described as the picture of an ideal state in which men should find peace instead of ceaseless conflict, justice instead of greed, and spiritual development instead of stagnation. Described in this way, they seem to belong to that great series of Ideal Commonwealths of which Plato's "Republic," More's "Utopia," and Campanella's "City of the Sun" are the best known examples. But in his politics, as in his famous description of the future life, Dante was always a prophet, perhaps a statesman, but never primarily a philosopher. There is no academic aloofness in the intensity and passion of the poet. The prose of Dante is very different in form from his great poetry, but it is animated by the same spirit. As he walked the streets of an Italian city it is said that the common people pointed with awe to the dark and slender figure of the man who had gone down into hell. And spiritually it was true. So, too, he had seen the vision of perfect order under a heaven-sent emperor who was to rebuild the lost glories of Augustus, under whom all the peoples of the world were to become once more Roman and really Christian. Through all the discouragements and seeming disappointments of a bitter life, the great son of Florence never doubted for one moment that the dream which he voiced for the ten silent centuries was destined to come true. It is this complete sincerity, passion, and intensity of conviction, rather than the mere details of his

argument and plan, which have given to the political writings of Dante, and especially to "De Monarchia," so high a place in the world's literature. His lips had been touched by a living coal from off the altar of Jehovah.

The prophetic quality in Dante's politics is best seen in a quotation. Listen first to the philosopher. Plato puts these words into the mouth of Socrates: "We were inquiring into the nature of absolute justice and into the character of the perfectly just, and into injustice and the perfectly unjust, that we might have an ideal. We were to look at these in order that we might judge of our own happiness and unhappiness according to the standard which they exhibited and the degree in which we resembled them, but not with any view of showing that they could exist in fact." As the picture of the painter is no worse because it does not correspond to a real man, so the ideal city is no worse because it is impossible of realization.¹ Now listen to the prophet and the poet: "I long not only to burgeon, but also to bear fruit for the public advantage, and to set forth fruits unattempted by others." So all his words pointed to a goal which might be grasped by living men if they would only reach out for it. After almost sixty years of neglect, an emperor finally crossed the Alps, and Henry of Luxemburg appeared in the valley of the Po in the year 1310. It seemed to the passionate soul of Dante that the ideal of the centuries had at last become real. "Lo now is the acceptable time wherein arise the signs of consolation and peace. For a new day beginneth to glow, showing forth the dawn which is even now dissipating the darkness of our long calamity; and already the breezes of the east begin to blow, the lips of heaven glow red, and caress the auspices of the nations with caressing calm. And we, too, shall see the looked-for

¹ Plato, "Republic" (Jowett's translation), V, 457.

joy, we who have kept vigil through the long night in the desert.”¹ There is nothing comparable to the political writings of Dante save only the Messianic vision of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah.

Almost exactly two hundred years after Dante, another famous citizen of Florence wrote a book with a similar title. “The Prince” of Machiavelli and “The Monarch” of Dante would probably stand in any list of ten important works on politics. But all similarity ends with the title. The Prince is a man who gains his power by intrigue and the arts of diplomacy. The Monarch is a heaven-appointed ruler the sanction of whose authority is service and the end of whose government is justice. Two hundred years had brought those subtle and fundamental changes which carry us from the Middle Ages, with their outward discords and their inward loyalties, to modern times, dominated by the historical and the critical spirit. A Clemenceau or a Lloyd George could to-day read “The Prince” with substantial sympathy and understanding. Indeed, it sounds like a code of practical precepts for a modern peace conference. It would require much more than a translation to make them understand “The Monarch.” They would need to be born again. With all the clearness of its historical analysis and the keenness of its intellectual perception, “The Prince” discovers no great passion for any moral ends. The eyes of Machiavelli are never dimmed by tears.

Now everything which Dante wrote is shot through and through by the burning flames of four great loyalties, in each of which he summarized one of the conflicting political cross-currents of a troubled age. There was first the white city on the Arno, where he had been born and reared and from which he was so long an exile. He must have loved

¹ “De Monarchia,” I, 1 (Wicksteed); “Epistolæ,” V (Wicksteed).

Florence very greatly to have hated her so fiercely. But unlike many Italians of his day, Dante was never primarily a citizen. He had a deep and abiding affection for Italy, which appears again and again in his prose as well as in his poetry. But Dante was even less of a patriot than he was a citizen. For beyond any loyalty to his city and to the great land in which he wandered as an exile lay the deeper loyalty to the church as an institution destined to bring spiritual light to the world, and, above all, to the empire as the symbol of human unity and progress. Other men had doubtless dreamed of a league of nations before Woodrow Wilson. It may have been suggested to him by others among his contemporaries. But history will surely record that it was he alone and no other who, wisely or unwisely, was willing to make the idea the touchstone of a career and to sacrifice to it all minor personal and political ambitions. In some such way, more than any other man of his generation, Dante took an old, perhaps wholly impractical but wonderfully noble idea, and lived for it without shadow of turning. The average Ghibelline doubtless used the empire to forward personal ambition and to increase the local power of his dominion. So the Guelf used the power of the Pope to win autonomy for his own city. Dante was neither Guelf nor Ghibelline, because he made the purity of the church and the glory of the empire final ends in his personal career. We may not agree with his purposes, we may recognize weakness and limitations, but we may not doubt that so complete a loyalty and so perfect a devotion adds the crown of glory to the life of any man, and makes the man himself worth remembering, even after six hundred years.

Florence he denounces in language as terrible as any that has ever been written. Yet between the lines we seem to

read the longing of the exile to return: "Your city, worn out with long-drawn sufferings, shall be given at last into the hands of aliens, the greatest part of you scattered in death and captivity, while the few that are left to endure their captivity shall look on and weep." She is the viper that turns upon the entrails of her mother. She is the sick sheep that infects the flock of the Lord with her contagion. "Whilst scorning her rightful king, she bluseth not in her madness to traffic in laws which are not hers, with a king who is not her own, for power that she may use amiss." In similar prophetic vein he calls on all the sons of Italy to receive the emperor. "O Italy! henceforth rejoice; though now to be pitied by the very Saracens, yet soon to be envied throughout the world, because thy bridegroom, the solace of the world and the glory of the people, the most clement Henry, Divus and Augustus, is hastening to the bridal." "Awake then all ye dwellers in Italy and arise before your king since you are destined not only to obey his command, but as freeborn children to follow his guidance." The monarch who was to come with healing in his wings was to be far more than an Italian king. He must be universal. "Nor do I exhort you only to arise, but to stand dumb before his presence. Ye who drink his streams and sail upon his seas; who tread upon the sands of the shores and the summits of the Alps, which are his; who possess whatever public rights ye enjoy, and all things ye hold in private, by the chain of his law, not else; deceive not yourselves in ignorance, nor dream in your hearts and say, We have no Lord, for all that heaven circles is his orchard and his lake."¹

You will remember that Henry died in the summer of 1313, whether of poison in the sacramental wine, or of the

¹ "Epistolæ" (Wicksteed), VII, V.

deadly fever of the Italian lowlands. The immediate hope of empire was gone, and the capitol of a corrupt church had passed to Avignon, where the cardinals were gathered to elect a new Pope. In his letter to the Italian cardinals there appear at once a perfectly conscious loyalty to the church and a dawning and unconscious national patriotism, which mark the author as the exponent of one age and the herald of another. "How doth the city sit desolate, which was filled with people! The mistress of the nations has become a widow. . . . Ah, pitying mother, Bride of Christ, what sons dost thou produce, in water and in the spirit to thy shame!" The great saints of the church lie neglected. "Why so? Because those sought God as the goal and supreme good; and these seek fortune and appointments." Then Dante's patriotism shines through the other passions of his soul. "And most of all is this addressed to you, who have known the sacred Tiber as infants. For although the Latin country must be reverently loved by all Italians as the source of their political life, yet to you it is the source of your very being also." He pleads with the cardinals to elect an Italian and to bring the church back to the independence of Rome. There is still time to undo a great wrong. "Although the mark and the scar of infamy must burn the apostolic seat like fire, and befoul her for whose keeping heaven and earth are prepared, yet amends may come, if all of you who are the authors of this going astray fight manfully and with one mind for the bride of Christ, for the seat of the bride which is Rome, and to speak in a broader way for the whole estate of those who are pilgrims in the earth."¹

Yet Dante had no illusions about the characters of particular Popes, and he was able to distinguish clearly between

¹ "Epistolæ" (Wicksteed), VIII.

the claims of the church and the sins or the pretensions of a Boniface or a Clement. He had probably attended the great jubilee at Rome in the year 1300, when immense throngs crowded the Imperial city. If so, he must have seen Boniface as he seated himself on the throne of Constantine, wearing the sword, the crown, and the sceptre of the empire, and shouting aloud, "I am Cæsar, I am Emperor."¹ Such a scene displayed to the mind of Dante, not the strength of papal power, but its weakness and decay. And he does not hesitate to reserve an interesting place in an astonishingly democratic hell for worldly and avaricious Popes. Every reader of the "Divine Comedy" will remember the nineteenth canto of the "Inferno," where Virgil and Dante find Pope Nicholas, thrust like a stake head downward into a hole in the rock, with lambent flames playing on the soles of his feet. As each new Pope arrives, his predecessor slips farther down into the hole to make room, and Nicholas is already expecting Boniface:

I saw the livid stone, throughout the sides
 And in its bottom full of apertures,
 All equal in their width, and circular each.
 . . . From out the mouth
 Of every one emerged a sinner's feet,
 And of the legs high upward as the calf.
 The rest beneath was hid. On either foot
 The soles were burning; whence the flexile joints
 Glanced with such violent motion, as had snapped
 Asunder cords or twisted withes. As flame,
 Feeding on unctuous matter, glides along
 The surface, scarcely touching where it moves;
 So here, from heel to point, glided the flames.²

Nicholas at first mistook Dante for Boniface, whom he was expecting to take his place. And after Boniface,

¹ Bryce, "The Holy Roman Empire," 109.

² "Inferno" (Cary's translation), XIX.

Clement, who removed the capitol of the church from Italy to France. There is no pity, but only infinite scorn as Dante speaks:

I know not if I here too far presumed,
But in this strain I answered: Tell me now
What treasures from Saint Peter at the first
Our Lord demanded, when he put the keys
Into his charge? Surely he asked no more
But "Follow me!" . . .
 . . . Abide thou then;
Thy punishment of right is merited.
 . . . Your avarice
O'ercasts the world with mourning, under foot
Treading the good, and raising bad men up.
Of shepherds like to you, the Evangelist
Was ware, when her, who sits upon the waves,
With kings in filthy whoredom he beheld;
She who with seven heads towered at her birth,
And from ten horns her proof of glory drew,
Long as her spouse in virtue took delight.
Of gold and silver ye have made your god,
Differing wherein from the idolater,
But that he worships one, a hundred ye?
Ah Constantine! to how much ill gave birth,
Not thy conversion, but that plenteous dower,
Which the first wealthy Father gained from thee.¹

Dante's high ideal for the papacy was the only motive which led him to judge individual Popes with seeming harshness. Celestine Fifth was a pitiful old man, a hermit, who at the age of eighty was called from his holy cell in the Abruzzi to the papal chair. After a short experience of the turmoil of the most difficult position in the world, the old man grew homesick for the quiet of his cell and abdicated. But he was not allowed to return, and Boniface, his succes-

¹ "Inferno" (Cary's translation), XIX.

sor, kept him in prison until he died, broken-hearted. Petrarch praised him for his unworldly attitude. Not so Dante. Papal power was to him a mighty trust which no one had the right to give up after he had assumed it. Near the mouth of hell, Virgil and Dante find a group of souls, full of sighs, lamentations, and loud moans, excluded both from hell and heaven. Among them he saw,

And knew the shade of him, who to base fear
Yielding, abjured his high estate. Forthwith
I understood for certain, this the tribe
Of those ill spirits both to God displeasing
And to his foes. These wretches, who ne'er lived,
Went on in nakedness, and sorely stung
By wasps and hornets, which bedewed their cheeks
With blood, that, mixed with tears, dropped to their feet,
And by disgustful worms was gathered there.¹

The future lay with the rising kingdoms, but Dante had no respect for the kings of his day, and especially the kings of France, whom he evidently regarded as upstarts. He did not defend any divine right of kings based on birth, but only the divine right of the empire, to which men were not born, but to which they were elected under the guidance of God. Throughout the Middle Ages both the papacy and the empire were at least in theory essentially democratic institutions to which any free-born man might be called by the will of God. And no one has ever seen more clearly than Dante the weakness of any appeal to respect based on birth alone. So in the quarrel between Boniface and Philip the Fair of France, in which Boniface was arrested and bitterly insulted, he takes the side of the Pope and compares him to Christ. His description of the origin of the French royal family placed the "Divine Comedy" under

¹ "Inferno" (Cary's translation), III.

the interdict of the French kings for centuries. In Purgatory the poet meets Hugh, the founder of the Capetian line:

Hugh Capet was I hight: from me descend
 The Philips and the Louis, of whom France
 Newly is governed: born of one who plied
 The slaughterer's trade at Paris. When the race
 Of ancient kings had vanished (all save one
 Wrapt up in sable weeds) within my grip
 I found the reins of empire, and such powers
 Of new acquirement, with full store of friends,
 That soon the widowed circlet of the crown
 Was girt upon the temples of my son,
 He from whose bones the anointed race begins.
 Till the great dower of Provence had removed
 The stains, that yet obscured our lowly blood,
 Its sway indeed was narrow; but howe'er
 It wrought no evil: there with force and lies,
 Began its rapine: after, for amends,
 Poitou it seized, Navarre, and Gascony.¹

In Dante's view it is not the low birth which weakens the claims of the French royal house to all confidence and respect, but the absence of divine appointment, as shown by a long career of guilt, treachery, and blood. This long history is crowned when the king dares to lay his hands on the holder of the keys, the spiritual successor of Christ. Dante places Boniface in hell for his sins against his great office, but he will not allow him to be abused by mere earthly kings without a protest:

To hide with direr guilt
 Past ill and future, Lo! the flower-de-luce
 Enters Alagna: in his Vicar Christ
 Himself a captive, and his mockery
 Acted again. Lo! to his holy lip
 The vinegar and gall once more applied;

¹ "Purgatory" (Cary's translation), XX.

And he twixt living robbers doomed to bleed.
 Lo! the new Pilate, of whose cruelty
 Such violence cannot fill the measure up,
 With no decree to sanction, pushes on
 Into the temple his yet eager sails.¹

The disorder which Dante saw everywhere around him seemed to him to be due to the unnatural attempt to unite the temporal and the spiritual powers in the same hands :

Thus the cause
 Is not corrupted nature in yourselves,
 But ill conducting, that hath turned the world
 To evil. Rome, that turned it into good,
 Was wont to boast two suns, whose several beams
 Cast light on either way, the world's and God's.
 One since hath quenched the other; and the sword
 Is grafted on the crook; and, so conjoined,
 Each must perforce decline to worse, unawed
 By fear of other.²

So Dante has stated more clearly than any other man the absolute necessity for the separation of church and state. When we use this phrase we might at first imagine that he was a sort of thirteenth-century Thomas Jefferson. Nothing, of course, could be more misleading. In advocating separation he desires a result which is essentially modern, for reasons and purposes which are intensely medieval. We have lost that otherworldly wistfulness which marked the finer spirits of Dante's day. Most of us have come to advocate the separation of church and state. It is a principle written into every modern constitution throughout the world except, perhaps, those of some of the more backward South American republics. Political activity on the part of the

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² "Purgatory" (Cary's translation), XVI.

church is to all modern liberals as thoroughly obnoxious as religious interference from the state. Individual liberty and the separation of church and state are the same to us. But we believe in the necessity of this principle because we have learned through slow and bitter experience, first, that unity in religious belief is impossible, and, second, that it is baneful and undesirable. Many men of many minds coming together by a series of mighty accidents in the forests of North America, in spite of all their prejudices and traditions, were compelled by the sheer force of circumstances to tolerate the religious opinions of others. What circumstances had made necessary, political writings finally shaped into constitutional provision. And other lands learned, at least in part, from the Rhode Island of Roger Williams, the Pennsylvania of William Penn, and the Maryland of the Calverts, the unwelcome lesson of toleration. The modern separation of church and state was born not in the minds of men who scoffed, but of men who believed intensely, and who, therefore, came to respect the equally intense and different beliefs of their fellows.

Now Dante desired to separate church and state, not to preserve an inevitable diversity, but to safeguard and protect complete unity. The Pope was to give up his political functions either as a petty Italian prince or as a world ruler, that he might lead men in harmony and unity to the blessed vision of God. St. Bernard was surely a true son of the church as he was one of the great figures in a thousand years of history. And regarding this matter of the church, he was Dante's master. "Which is worth more?" he asks, "or seems to you more worthy, to forgive sins, or to divide inheritances? These base and material cares have as judges the kings and princes of the earth. . . . If you wish to possess temporal and spiritual power at the same

time, you will lose both. You will belong to those of whom God has said: They have ruled, but not by me. They have given orders, but I have not approved."¹ So Dante also felt. He was no reformer in the sense that Luther and Calvin or even Savonarola were reformers, much less a radical, like Rousseau or Paine. Yet he did not hesitate to call the church from dreams of earthly empire to that position of spiritual leadership which he regarded her true glory. Under her all men were to worship one God in perfect unity. To him, as to the age in which he lived, truth was always truth, absolute, immutable, Godgiven.

The Imperial tradition which lived for a thousand years and more after the fall of Rome had its chief practical importance in keeping alive the idea of a wider community in an age in which all allegiance was essentially local. The Roman law proved a mighty habit which was used by the rising national kings to strengthen their claims; and the modern state itself is everywhere based, at least in part, on notions which come down to us through medieval thought from Justinian and the earlier jurists of the empire. The state had lessened strife between tribe and tribe, city and city, only to allow more costly and more bitter, if less frequent, wars between the states themselves. Sovereignty failed as a world ideal, but it was preserved in the strong centralized governments which were already arising. Now, although Dante had a real love for Italy, the sovereignty which he desired was bounded by no limits, either national, linguistic, or strategic. He speaks of the Roman people with great respect. But the Romans are clearly not citizens of Rome nor even Italians. They are all the people from sea to sea who acknowledge the supremacy of one ruler. They may be few—they will become many. And a man is

¹ Janet, "Philosophie Morale et Politique," I, 267-269.

a Roman, not by accident of birth, but by deliberate choice. It is a great free people, because its citizens have chosen peace rather than discord.

There is an interesting analogy between Dante's conception of a Roman and the modern conception of citizenship by naturalization. In each case membership is won by an act which is essentially spiritual. All men might be Romans if they acknowledged the supremacy of the emperor in political matters and of the successor of Peter in matters of faith. In this respect Dante was no more a good Italian than he was a good Frenchman or Englishman. Italy was, indeed, a fair and beautiful land to be loved. It was not a state to be served against all others. He could not be either a patriot or a traitor, for each term already implies an essentially modern conception.

In the days of Dante, states were, indeed, already crystallizing out of the confused welter of feudalism as a matter of fact, but not at all as a matter of belief or feeling. Loyalties were still essentially either local or personal. And, therefore, when Dante sought a political system which might bind all men together, he pointed not to a flag, or a constitution, or a commonwealth, but to an emperor. No one then could have spoken of the personality of France or Italy. And yet, in his belief in the empire, Dante was helping to keep alive a notion which was finally to result, not in the complete unity which he expected, but in the self-conscious, sovereign, and inevitably discordant nations of today. The ideas of a common sovereignty, of common allegiance, of citizenship in a community, which Dante desired for all men, have become changed into patriotism. We would rather be good Frenchmen, good Englishmen, good Americans. He would have had us first of all become good men. And so his politics are essentially connected with his

ethics and his religion. So, too, all his writings are in one sense political, but especially the "Convivio," in which he discusses the nature of nobility; the "De Monarchia," in which he establishes the claims of the emperor to obedience; the Letters, in which he hails the coming glory of the empire; and, above all, the "Divine Comedy" itself, where he illustrates and gives point to all his political views from the incidents of his astonishing journey to the land of shades.

The historical arguments which Dante used to support the claims of the empire have lost most of their meaning to us, because we cannot start with the same unconscious premises. Like all political arguments, they are interesting, not so much for what they say as for that which they leave unsaid because it seems so clear that it requires no proof. His theory of empire did not really rest on what he thought of the past, but of what he hoped for the future. Any empire which would bind the whole community of mankind into unity would by the very result have been proved to be Roman. Therefore Dante could not see that Charlemagne and Otto were not really successors of Augustus. They were more like drunken tramps who put on discarded Prince Albert coats, or like children who play with their mother's clothes. The real importance of the empire was to lie in the astonishing effects which it produced in Italy and Germany and France, and not in any real or direct relation to the past. And those effects, in stimulating national power in France and in delaying its coming in Italy and Germany, in keeping alive a spirit of opposition to the Pope which was one of the causes of the German Reformation, were precisely the effects which Dante would have been the last to desire if he could have foreseen them. To Dante, however, the glories of the Roman Empire at its height,

and its undoubted and very real contributions to civilization, were final evidence that it was destined to be eternal. And all his proofs rest on two fundamental assumptions, all the more important because he never states them.

The first was this: All Scripture is inspired of God. Now, in an age when books were few and almost all those which were available were really classics, Scripture practically included almost all known literature. Dante would have distinguished the weight of various books, and the Bible would have stood first. Yet he speaks of Livy as the "historian who errs not." So Virgil is an unquestioned source of historical information. The fathers of the church, and, above all, the philosopher Aristotle, are authorities in matters of belief, to such an extent that, when Dante had reached an opposite opinion as to the source of nobility, he does not hesitate to change when he finds that Aristotle is against him. With such absolute sources he has no difficulty with his facts, and, like every other writer in quest of miracles, he finds them in great abundance to prove his position. The geese which saved Rome by rousing the sleeping garrison, the conquests of the Romans, and the Imperial peace at the time when Christ was born, all prove that the Roman Empire was the final political goal of mankind.

Dante's second unconscious assumption throughout his argument is this: That a divine purpose guides all the events of history, and that God's purpose may be read by those who seek it with the eye of faith and reason. Honest inquiry can decipher the riddle of the past, and use the knowledge as a scientific law to prophesy the future. There is no sense of the immense limitations of the human reason. It is true that there are certain fields which are closed to inquiry:

Insane who hopes our reason may that space explore,
 Which holds three persons in one substance knit.
 Seek not the wherefore race of human kind;
 Could ye have seen the whole, no need had been
 For Mary to bring forth. Moreover, ye
 Have seen such men desiring fruitlessly;
 To whose desires, repose would have been given,
 That now but serve them for eternal grief.
 I speak of Plato and the Stagirite,
 And others many more.

So, too, Virgil reproves Dante for the pardonable curiosity which led him to wonder why the dead cast no shadows, while the living stopped the light.

And then he bent
 Downward his forehead, and in troubled mood
 Broke off his speech.¹

All idle, merely scientific curiosity leads to reproof and perhaps to grave disaster, as when Ulysses sailed too far on seas which he was not meant to traverse. In matters concerning the physical universe, where modern men feel very sure of the possibilities of the human reason, Dante would have felt weakness. In matters of conduct and of policy, where to us the meaning often seems most dim and uncertain, Dante saw the shining of eternal light. He walked with sure tread, face forward, unafraid. It was not merely that the page of history lay open, but that its purpose was forever clear to the patient and the thoughtful.

On one occasion, at least, a more critical attitude would have been of great advantage to Dante in the pursuit of his argument. The claims of the Pope to temporal power were supported by a document which is known in history as the Donation of Constantine. According to this account,

¹ "Purgatory" (Cary's translation), III.

the emperor had been cured of leprosy by the Pope Sylvester, and in return had made a contract assigning to him full temporal authority in the western world. Now it is perfectly evident, even to superficial examination, that this is a stupendous forgery, and that the document could not have been written until at least four hundred years had passed. It was first critically assailed by Laurentius Valla, in 1440, a fact which proves that the modern world had already begun to come at that time. But Dante does not think to question its authenticity. To have done so in the fourteenth century would have been utterly impossible. He did not deny that the emperor had actually tried to give away his powers to the Pope. He argued that the Pope could not receive power which was so contrary to the functions of his office, and that the emperor had no right to give up power that had been delegated to him by God. It was not the fact of the Donation which aroused doubts in Dante's mind, it was the legal validity of the title which it purported to convey. This argument is interesting not only because it illustrates the two methods of criticism, by Dante in the fourteenth century and by Valla in the fifteenth, but because Dante used a legal maxim which every lawyer will recognize as still having vitality in American constitutional law, the principle that Power which has once been delegated to an agent may not be delegated again.¹

But beyond his arguments for a common authority, Dante discusses three great questions at once political and ethical, which remain significant even after his conception of the empire has become shadowy and unreal. What is the true nobility which gives a man the right to be leader of his fellows? What is the end and the purpose of good government? What is liberty?

¹ "De Monarchia," III, 10.

The source of nobility is the chief political question of the "Convivio." In the thirteenth century, as at many other periods of human history, men gained power and authority either by wealth or birth. The worth of a man was likely to be measured by ancient wealth and gracious manners. The Guelfs were often rich burghers from the rising cities, and emphasized wealth. The Ghibellines more often relied on the antiquity of their descent. Now Dante's conception of the state was neither aristocratic nor democratic in the ordinary meaning of these words. It was rather mystical and religious.

Riches do not give to a man or a family any real claims to special respect. Their imperfection may be seen in three things: "First, in their undiscerning advent; second, in their perilous growth; third, in their hurtful possession." Gold and silver are indeed beautiful in themselves. It is only as objects of human possession that they show their imperfections. Fortunes seemed to Dante to be acquired in one of three ways, either by pure chance and luck, as when a churl finds a pot of gold, or by chance aided by reason and good judgment, or by chance assisted by fraud, as in cases of theft or plunder. In every case a candid man would acknowledge that the element of chance was very great. The wise man will gladly give of these imperfect things to gain perfect things, such as are the hearts of good men. And this is a market which is open every day. Even the selfish, who never give anything, admire the memory of the generous.

Riches promise everything. They will take away hunger and thirst. But in place of satiety and refreshment they produce a new thirst, and in the place of sufficiency they produce a new limit, that is to say, a greater quantity to long for, and with it fear and care for what has already

been acquired, "so that verily they give no quiet and multiply care, which without them was not there before." Then, he appeals to experience. "That our faith may be drawn from our own eyes, let us give heed to the life of them who chase them, and see in what security they live when they have gathered of them, how content they are, how reposed! And what else, day by day, imperils and slays cities, countries, and single persons as much as the new amassing of wealth by any one? Which amassing reveals new longings, the goal of which may not be reached without wrong to some one." The merchants travel in constant fear, trembling when the wind whispers through the leaves. But when they have deposited their stores of wealth, they travel full of security, and shorten their way by song and discourse. So a wise man neither desires riches, nor, when he has them, does he unite himself to them. They are essentially accidental, and not decisive.

What can be more absurd than for a man to imagine that he is wise or good or even intelligent just because he is rich? Only this, to suppose that he is made noble by the even greater accident of birth. If one cannot by good deeds become noble in one generation, how can he become so through a thousand generations? If some families are essentially noble, and others ignoble, what becomes of the common origin of the human race, and of the brotherhood of man? The nobility of every man depends, neither on his own good fortune in amassing wealth, nor in that of his grandfather, but on himself alone. And Dante could have sung with Burns, "A man's a man for a' that!" A family is like a heap of red and white wheat; the color of the heap depends on the colors of the individual grains. As we add white grains the whole becomes white. As we take them away the red color predominates. "And without

doubt, Aristotle would laugh aloud if he heard folk making two species of the human race, like that of horses and asses; for those who so think might at any rate be considered the asses." The stock does not ennoble the several persons, but the several persons the stock. True nobility is a little seed which the good God places in the heart of a man who turns to him in the quest of light and virtue.¹

Now all this must not lead us to suppose that Dante was in any sense a democrat. Even the authority of the philosopher could not lead him to see any wisdom in majorities. No question of either science or policy is determined by the method of counting noses. Suppose we should leave to popular vote the question of the size of the sun. Would not the majority say that it is about a foot wide? The opinion of one well-informed man is worth the vote of ten thousand who do not know. So, too, in matters like the nature of nobility, the popular opinion is usually wrong. "They who so judge, judge only by what they perceive of the things which chance can give and take away; for when they see alliances and distinguished marriages and stupendous buildings and great possessions and mighty lordships, they suppose them to a cause of nobleness, nay, they suppose them to be nobleness itself!"²

The true purpose of the state is the same as that of society itself. Man is not distinguished by being alone, or by mere consciousness, nor even by intelligence, but by potential intellect; by which Dante means all the spiritual capacities of men which are ever capable of growth. It is the function of the state to keep this potential intellect constantly actualized, both in the field of thought and action. A good government and a well-ordered world is, therefore,

¹ "Convivio" (Jackson's translation), Book IV.

² "Convivio" (Jackson's translation), IV, 8.

one in which the mass of men are always growing to a new and unexpected spiritual development. Laws are always a means and not an end. A law which does not help men generally to express more fully the powers which make them really men, is no law at all. So the people exist not for the sake of the ruler, but the ruler for the sake of the people. The monarch deserves reverence because he is the servant of all.¹

In an age of constant war and unrest Dante desired peace, not for its own sake, nor because it might make it possible to amass wealth, but because war makes impossible the realization of those purposes which give meaning to life and which endow humanity itself with real dignity. In a time when, in spite of great cathedrals and noble monuments to human genius, the mass of men must have been very miserable indeed, sure of nothing but that another would reap their harvests and eat their children's bread, Dante looked beyond the claims of wealth and nobility and genius to the needs of men. "The end of every society," he said, "is the common good of those associated."² In spite of the darkness of many of his pages, he looked to a time when men should be happier and better than they were. In his love for men he was, in a truer and better sense than the usual one, a democrat. In his unquenchable hope for mankind he was an optimist. And surely no one has ever stated more truly the final purpose of all human institutions, whether they be laws, or creeds, or governments. Let me quote his own rather difficult statement again: "The work proper to the human race, taken as a whole, is to keep the whole capacity of the potential intellect constantly actualized, primarily for thought, and by exten-

¹ "De Monarchia," Book I.

² "De Monarchia," I, 5.

sion and by means of thought, for action." Surely a sentence still worth pondering, even in this year of our Lord 1921!¹

What, then, is freedom? Here Dante met the most difficult of his problems, because freedom was the battle-cry of the Guelfs, who used it as a synonym for local independence. Indeed, his own master, Virgil, always speaks of freedom and liberty in the same sense, as indicating the absence of a foreign yoke. And so these words are almost always used in political documents from the days of Dante to those of Thomas Jefferson. Now Dante, in the quest of peace, justice, and unity, was as much an advocate of strong central government as Alexander Hamilton himself. He desired not only an empire, but an empire which could enforce its decrees. It is true that he recognized the fact that laws would need to vary according to local needs. The Scythians would require different laws to rule them in the frozen north from the Garamantes, who, as he quaintly puts it, scarcely can bear the weight of their scanty clothes. But after all, in every case of dispute, and legally always, the sovereign was to be the source of law and the center of authority. Only so could he abolish greed and compel harmony. There was no sentimentality or softness in the idealism of Dante. Beneath the velvet surface there was always iron. How could he be at once the advocate of empire and the lover of liberty?

Dante did not recognize that because a man lived in fear in a free city he was himself necessarily free, any more than we can recognize that a man who works twelve hours a day in the steel-mills of Pittsburgh is really free because his

¹ "De Monarchia," I, 4. "Satis igitur declaratum est, quod proprium opus humani generis totaliter accepti, est actuare semper totam potentiam intellectus possibilis, per prius ad speculandum, et secundario propter hoc ad operandum per suam extensionem."

task is the result of what is, with unconscious humor, called the freedom of contract. He appealed from the city to the citizen. It was the freedom of men and not the freedom of cities in which he was vitally interested. A man is free when he can live his own life for himself, under a government which is at once strong and just. Wherever government exists for the people there is liberty. One is not free when he acts according to unguided whim contrary to the needs of society, but when he obeys the supreme purposes for which society is instituted. The freedom of the citizen is like the freedom of the member of the orchestra who yields himself gladly to the leader's guidance. Dante's conception of freedom reaches to the individual, but, like every true conception, is not finally individualistic, but social. "The observance of the law, if it be joyous, if it be free, is not only proved to be no slavery, but to him who looketh in clearness is seen to be supreme liberty. For what else is freedom, save freedom to act, which the laws make easy for those who submit to them. They alone are free who of their own will obey the law." It is this clear analysis of the essential nature of liberty which seems to me to place Dante high among the masters of political thought.¹ And his whole political philosophy he could sum up in the words of that great son of New Hampshire who cried, "Liberty and Union, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable!"

He loved the church as the hope of religion, he loved the empire as the pathway to peace, and in them both he loved mankind.

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¹ "De Monarchia," I, 12; "Epistolæ," VI.