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Cant

(Views and Comments)

Dora Marsden

1914

”Let us rid our mind of cant”: in which sentiment witness the hustle of the popular philosopher. Why rid ourselves of cant? Who knows anything about its uses? May not cant be a necessary utility like clothing: why, then, should we allow ourselves to be hustled into casting it off merely to live up to the exigencies of dramatic oratory? Rather let us dissect: the one safe course to follow in doubling popular heroics back upon popular philosophy. To chant is to sing: to cant is to make—anything you please—into a song. The difference between the two is that each directs its emphasis towards a particular and different stage of the vocal process. To chant, i.e., to sing, is to have regard to the actual execution of the arranged harmony. To cant, i.e., the making of a song, concerns itself with the process antecedent to the singing: it is concerned with the construction of the song. Joy in the actual performance is the main attraction of the chant, and the substance and arrangement of the song subserves that. In canting the pleasure is in the substance and arrangement (selective interpretation!) and it is this which the pleasure of canting subserves. The difference between our local ”philharmonic” letting itself go on the Hallelujah chorus

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and Mr. Lloyd George or any other statesman letting themselves go on the causes of the war can be rendered down to this difference.

No one dreams of saying "let us rid ourselves of song!" Why then the difference in acquiescence when one says, "let us rid ourselves of song-making!" It is due to a recognition of the reversal in motive: it is due to suspicion: in a song the words are intended to heighten and increase the pleasure of the singing: in cant, the pleasure of singing is to further and enforce the substance embodied in the words. In the song the expression of emotion is the end. In cant the emotion embodied in the expression is utilised to serve the interests embodied in the words: with intent of making that interest paramount over all other interests. To heighten the importance of a matter by emphasis and reiteration is, in fact, just what the man in the street has always meant when he observed that someone is "making a song" about a matter. "Making a song" is a design to make one aspect of an affair all-absorbing by means of repetition, lilt, rhyme, rhythm: but above all by repetition. The song and cant (motives apart) are identical in this. Consider the common church anthem as an instance: a tag is taken: it is told once or twenty times over in the treble: it is told over again in the bass, and again and yet again in the tenor and contralto: then in twos, then the quartette, then the full chorus: a most pleasurable diversion altogether! And one does not forget that tag in a hurry: it "runs in the head" to the exclusion of all other tags, for days. Cant does the same thing, and is intended to. Atrocities, German atrocities, more atrocities, always atrocities, always German, bombs, cathedral-fronts, stained glass, women, prisoners, and so on without end. Cant! The journalists and mob-orators have considered it necessary to "make a song" about these things in order to impress permanently on the British mind the connection between atrocious deeds and a German. Evidently they consider it necessary in order to keep English rage up

to the fighting point. Others may think it unnecessary, and only a very poor compliment to boot, but that for the present is a matter of opinion. One might, nevertheless, point out that with all songs at a certain stage there arises such a phenomenon as surfeit, when revulsion does the work of poetic justice and corrects the balance. We seem to be nearing it! Journalists and orators might note.

But to rid ourselves of cant, how can we? And why should we? We can try to be clever at canting and not to allow a possibly useful weapon to be turned to our own disadvantage. Because cant is not the attribute of anyone in particular: everybody cants. Any particular man's cant is his emphasis of his own point of view, which inevitably he seeks to press home by all the agencies within his power, and of which wards have become the chief. Consequently, it is open to everyone to accuse any rival of canting. The Kaiser with his deity cants like chanticleer: but he is lost besides our shrill roosters at home. The essence of cant is to fill the bill so completely and continuously with the statement of one's own case that the other side's case fails to reach the ear of the populace. We English have no "case" in Germany and Germany has no "case" here. In each country, however, there should be those in power who recognise the scope of cant: that it is only a preliminary defence. They assuredly should have heard to the last syllable the whole of their opponent's case in order to gauge the force of egoistic temper behind the force that will further it. It is essential to know the temper of the opposition they will be called upon to meet. Cant is not out of place with the multitude, if it were, it would not go down so well. In truth, it keeps them in good temper with themselves: but it would be fraught with the direst effects if it had influence with those who have to take stock and make plans. For the "masses" of the stout-heart but unbraced intelligence cant evolves a "battle-cry." It gives consistency to a possibly doubtful faith in the efficacy

of the sword: it warms and expands the spirit like an intoxicant: those who fear to lose a point for hocus-pocus by using plain English would say it strengthened the morale. Undoubtedly the war-whoop is cant's primitive and undeveloped ancestor, as the ear-splitting detonation of the big guns is its modern offspring. The intent of both is to put the foe to confusion by bluster to one's own advantage. There is no cause for alarm, therefore, in that the parsonic hosts are placing their pulpits in the market-place, and filling them with cantatists of all orders, exhorting us to mend any small rent which we may have tolerated in our robes of thick British cant. This vigorous species with the bell-like tones may continue to assault the heavens, unique as ever in its lack of guile, too stupid and unselfconscious to be insincere. It will serve if, in the prosecution of their solid business, men are able to put cant in its proper place, and if in national affairs those who are charged with responsibility know at what point its good uses end: limited to fortify one's own spirits, to depressing one's opponents, to winning the applause of the onlookers, and—above all—furnishing our spiritless shibboleths with their natural antidote. In the timid, if piping times of peace, men having created a verbal "Wrong" which they hold to have an existence independent of the weakening of Might, i.e., of Spirit, it behoves them that at times when at all costs that error must be corrected they shall have at hand always a verbal means of escape. Cant enables them to dodge the "Wrong" label and holds it firmly affixed to the brows of their opponents. They cant themselves into the right by making a song about it: incidentally drowning for their own side the sound of their opponent's cant, which, be assured, is engaged in the same heartening business in its own behalf. So cant remains a thing of words always, an affair intended for the gallery: useful in its sphere. Its baleful effects begin when it is taken for something fundamental: when it convinces its victims that it seriously affects the issue. When men get into the temper which can sing:

bility and foolhardiness. Might is not mocked: it is the one sphere where the genuine is winnowed from the sham.

Nearer to the spirit of good cant is the surmise of the orator that the struggle is to espouse the "ideals of freedom against the oppression of the Iron Heel"—Iron Heel presumably meaning, "armed force." A politician, or any professional deceiver can always count on doing good cant-business if he flourishes the word "freedom" well enough. That is because there is an utter lack of comprehension as to the meaning of the word "free." The word "free," in fact, charming as to sound as it is, for explicitness is a word too many: it is the redundancy responsible for abortive attempts without number in social aspirations. The "free" and the "powerful" are one. When one has the power to encompass a certain end, one is "free" to do it: not before. To be free means no more than that—to be powerful in any particular direction specified: but the aspect which needs engraving on the human consciousness is that it means no less: the spurious "freedoms"—"liberties" graciously allowed, without the power to enforce them if withheld: all that long list of "rights" held by powerless, enfranchised masses: these are the poor things, the winning of which makes the history of centuries: they are the liberties of sheep, of domestic beasts of burden: they have little or nothing to do with free men—men of power—capable of self-defence, forces to be reckoned with.

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completely identical characteristics. In their ambitions, their cant, they are one. Only the difference in their Might will define and divide them.

There are arguments used, however, which it would perhaps be paying too great a compliment to describe as cant. They are too obviously just erroneous observations. If one said that two and two made three, it would not be cant: but just a silly mistake. Of such is the orators' argument that we oppose "material force" with "spiritual might." All directed forces are the outcome of the spiritual: that is, animated by the living spirit. A gun, an airship, all the material appurtenances of war are aggressive evidence that spirit has been previously at work. The army of the veriest tyrant is all composed of the workings of mastering spirit. It is not the material which has made and makes them formidable, but spirit. Those who look contemptuously on the material forces of armies, and call them material, have the eyes which see not. A big dream, shared and toiled for by millions, is embodied in those devised means of aggression. The Might of a force is indeed the measure of the amount of spirit, just as submission and unwilling preparations are the measure of the lack of it. If we are subdued by the German host it will be because their spirit has been greater than our own. It is because of the great spirit of the German that he animates material with which to measure himself against the world. It is a great-souled thing to do: not lightly to be undertaken because not lightly to be abandoned. The world should see to that: as it will if it has the spirit. Which is why talk of peace, before events have revealed unmistakably the victors and the conquered is childish. To challenge the world to a test of might is not a matter to be regarded airily, but a matter of life and death: as much so to the nation as to the individual. To know that this is so, is to hold the automatic check on irresponsibility.

"For Right is Right, since God is God,
And Right the day must win,"

cant looks likely to be dangerous. Men are so liable to overlook the subtlety of such a sentiment. "Right" always, as the hymn says, wins the day: that is, Might wins it, and having won it, is automatically invested with its new title of Right. Cant tends to antedate the birth-hour of Right: that is why it proves a snare if its influence spreads into the quarters that matter: into the initiatory quarters. Cant may not, with impunity, penetrate into serious business. There men must look facts squarely in the face if they are to prevent being hit in the face by them. The rough-and-ready effects of cant are out of order here, where success and precise observation belong to each other. In business as in affairs of state, of course, it is quite in the way to attempt to confuse one's rival with cant, if one can safely; but in reviewing one's own case for serious purposes, no.

How far, therefore, men who are seeking to direct affairs on a large scale can manage to utilise the potentialities of cant, and yet keep themselves unspotted from it, becomes a nice question. Certainly by a sort of horse-sense even with the crowd, the man who has least to say carries most weight: certainly with the weighty: but there appears to be no end of good fun in exercising one's power to send thrills down the spines of audiences of thousands by audacious tickling of their vanity: in oratory that is, which orators a bit shamefacedly, it must be confessed, have called the exercising of a sense of power. Yet there is always a certain feeling of contempt for it: a feeling of the second-rate, and should be left for those "on the climb." Probably it is the uneasy realisation that out of an audience of ten thousand there will be five men who are chuckling under their breath at the spectacle: the five who stand for more

than the remaining thousands. One cannot help feeling that if the itinerant Ministers, now on the rant, had decided to forgo the exhibition of their eloquence, British prestige would have been none the worse, but better rather, and more meriting the onlooker's respect.

Mr. Lloyd George's flamboyant rhetoric about "scraps of paper" (over which effort, by the way, "The Times" gurgled a gleeful half-column of applause), would have come with undiminished dignity only from parsons, ecstatic novelists, and journalists. Coming from a responsible person it flecks the brilliance of feats of arms with the dimness of unintelligence. Yet from beginning to end it is a triumph in the art of covering up one's opponent's point: it is first-rate cant in fact, glowing with the speaking, forming, and colour of the picturesque. "Have you any Bank-notes'? What are they? Scraps of paper! Made from rags! Tear them up! Burn them!" subserves exquisitely the arranged anti-climax that these have the "credit of the British Empire behind them!" It is in the choice of the anti-climax that the full artistry of cant is revealed: for does not the opponents' whole case turn upon the fact that it is just the credit of the Empire that is being questioned? If the Might of the British Empire failed to be reasserted on the spot the "credit of the Empire" would be rapidly run down to the level of rags and scraps of paper. Let a German government establish itself in London, and Mr. George's enraptured audience will swiftly apprehend the connection between "armed force" and "the credit of the Empire"—this or any other.

"The Times," which on the eve of war was a valuable national asset, is now disporting itself in ungainly fashion trying to win the

favours of the verbalist host whose influence it was mainly instrumental in overcoming two months ago. One must see in it another of the multitudinous uses of cant it is to be supposed! Having broken the pacifist temper from its moorings in the first place, it seeks now by a gentle impersonal chiding of pacifism subtly combined with encouragement and judicious personal flattery of pacifists, to manoeuvre them past the impending danger of making an outcry for an early peace. In keeping with its present tactics, it has delivered itself afresh on the "meaning of the war." The war is, it says, "when' reduced to its simplest expression—a struggle between false and true standards of life." It piously proceeds, "We stand for a principle that no might can, in the long run, maintain itself, unless it be founded on some moral law." The "some" is delicious: it is so safe: so safe that the leader-writer concludes that here he can do no better than leave it. If he developed his point he needs would require to enlarge on the "ethical law," and doubtless he has a strong premonition that, when formulated, his ethical law would bluntly run "Might is right." At least we gather as much when a little further on he plaintively—or is it satirically—delivers himself thus: "The people of this country have hitherto lived in the touching faith that, sooner or later, it is truth that tells. They have not only neglected," . . . etc., etc.—neglected, that is, to keep their powder dry by matching German "News" agencies with similar British "News" agencies, and out of his own text it is easy to double back on the pious sentiment of his first paragraph, and adapt its phrases to fit the model of "Ye perfect English." "Prussianised Germany," he says, "has staked her existence upon the claim that might is right, with the corollary that Prussian might gives the measure of others' right." Adapted, this would run, "England has had, reluctantly, and in spite of mumbo-jumbo, to confess that her 'right' to existence as foremost nation is staked upon her ability to refurnish the 'might' to prove it. Having proved it, the corollary follows that English might will give the measure of others right." It is a curious historical phenomenon to find two paramount nations with such