DEMOCRACY AND LIBERTY

1.

The Will to Peace

Whenever the liberties of *Homo vulgaris* are invaded and made a mock of in a gross and contemptuous manner, as happened, for example, in the United States during the reign of Wilson, Palmer, Burleson and company, there are always observers who marvel that he bears the outrage with so little murmuring. Such observers only display their unfamiliarity with the elements of democratic science. The truth is that the common man's love of liberty, like his love of sense, justice and truth, is almost wholly imaginary. As I have argued, he is not actually happy when free; he is uncomfortable, a bit alarmed, and intolerably lonely. He longs for the warm, reassuring smell of the herd, and is willing to take the herdsman with it. Liberty is not a thing for such as he. He cannot enjoy it rationally himself, and he can think of it in 148 others only as something to be taken away from them. It is, when it becomes a reality, the exclusive possession of a small and disreputable minority of men, like knowledge, courage and honour. A special sort of man is needed to understand it, nay, to stand it—and he is inevitably an outlaw in democratic societies. The average man doesn't want to be free. He simply wants to be safe.

Nietzsche, with his usual clarity of vision, saw the point clearly. Liberty, he used to say, was something that, to the general, was too cold to be borne. Nevertheless, he apparently believed that there was an unnatural, drug-store sort of yearning for it in *all* men, and so he changed Schopenhauer's will-to-live into a will-to-power, *i. e.*, a will-to-free-function. Here he went too far, and in the wrong direction: he should have made it, on the lower levels, a will-to-peace. What the common man longs for in this world, before and above all his other longings, is the simplest and most ignominious sort of peace—the peace of a trusty in a well-managed penitentiary. He is willing to sacrifice everything else to it. He puts it above his dignity and he puts it above his pride. Above all, he puts it 149 above his liberty. The fact, perhaps, explains his veneration for policemen, in all the forms they take—his belief that there is a mysterious sanctity in law, however absurd it may be in fact. A policeman is a charlatan who offers, in return for obedience, to protect him (*a*) from his superiors, (*b*) from his equals, and (*c*) from himself. This last service, under democracy, is commonly the most esteemed of them all. In the United States, at least theoretically, it is the only thing that keeps ice-wagon drivers, Y. M. C. A. secretaries, insurance collectors and other such human camels from smoking opium, ruining themselves in the night clubs, and going to Palm Beach with Follies girls. It is a democratic invention.

Here, though the common man is deceived, he starts from a sound premiss: to wit, that liberty is something too hot for his hands—or, as Nietzsche put it, too cold for his spine. Worse, he sees in it something that is a weapon against him in the hands of his enemy, the man of superior kidney. Be true to your nature, and follow its teachings: this Emersonian counsel, it must be manifest, offers an embarrassing support to every variety of the *droit de seigneur*. The history of democracy is a history of efforts to force successive minorities to be *un*true to their nature. Democracy, in fact, stands in greater peril of the free spirit than any sort of despotism ever heard of. The despot, at least, is always safe in one respect: his own belief in himself cannot be shaken. But democracies may be demoralized and run amok, and so they are in vast dread of heresy, as a Sunday-school superintendent is in dread of scarlet women, light wines and beer, and the unreadable works of Charles Darwin. It would be unimaginable for a democracy to submit serenely to such gross dissents as Frederick the Great not only permitted, but even encouraged. Once the mob is on the loose, there is no holding it. So the subversive minority must be reduced to impotence; the heretic must be put down.

If, as they say, one of the main purposes of all civilized government is to preserve and augment the liberty of the individual, then surely democracy accomplishes it less efficiently than any other form. Is the individual worth thinking of at all? Then the superior individual is worth more thought than his inferiors. But it is precisely the superior individual who is the chief victim of the democratic process. It not only tries to regulate his acts; it also tries to delimit his thoughts; it is constantly inventing new forms of the old crime of imagining the King's death. The Roman *lex de majestate* was put upon the books, not by an emperor, nor even by a consul, but by Saturninus, a tribune of the people. Its aim was to protect the state against aristocrats, *i. e.*, against free spirits, each holding himself answerable only to his own notions. The aim of democracy is to break all such free spirits to the common harness. It tries to iron them out, to pump them dry of self-respect, to make docile John Does of them. The measure of its success is the extent to which such men are brought down, and made common. The measure of civilization is the extent to which they resist and survive. Thus the only sort of liberty that is real under democracy is the liberty of the have-nots to destroy the liberty of the haves.

This liberty is supposed, in some occult way, to enhance human dignity. Perhaps, in one of its aspects, it actually does. The have-not gains something valuable when he acquires the delusion that he is the equal of his betters. It may not be true—but even a delusion, if it augments the dignity of man, is something. Certain apparent realities grow out of it: the peasant no longer pulls his forelock when he meets the baron, he is free to sue and be sued, he may denounce Huxley as a quack. But the thing, alas, works both ways. As one pan of the scale goes up, the other comes down. If democracy really loves the dignity of man, then it kills the thing it loves. Where it prevails, not even the King can be dignified in any rational sense: he becomes Harding, jabbering of

normalcy, or Coolidge, communing with his preposterous *Tabakparlement* around the stove. Nor the Pope: he becomes a Methodist bishop in a natty business-suit, and with a toothbrush moustache. Nor the Generalissimo: he becomes Pershing, haranguing Rotary, and slapping the backs of his fellow Elks.