

## Brain-Waves during the Heat-Wave

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The Pagan conception of the Universe has one great philosophical advantage over its competitors; this, that it recognizes a certain sardonic humor in the Lords of Destiny. It is a little more than practical joking, and a little less — but not much less — than Sadism. This humor is hidden from academic and commercial minds: even among artists it is only a few that understand and enjoy it.

Observe what happens to our ideals! One has only to formulate a desire in order to find Fate force one into a passionate denial of it. We seek to escape from the "dull monotony" of marriage, only to find ourselves the prey of a procession of the most tedious chorus girls.

We find no hate so embittered as that engendered by Love. The more one tries to help the poor, the more poor one makes them. One has only to overthrow a tyranny to find oneself compelled to impose the death penalty for sneezing, as dictator Kerensky would bear witness. To make the world safe for democracy we must abandon all popular control of the Executive. To destroy militarism we must create a military caste.

All this is in the nature of things; it is the standing joke of the gods; and those who only joke with difficulty add to our pleasure by their freely expressed annoyance.

The whole spirit of ancient comedy is resumed in the universal plot, which has been the basis of every religious legend. You take a man, dress him up as a Priest or a King or a hunter, and set out with him to the chase or the war or the sacrifice. Then, before you kill him, you break it to him gently that he is himself the destined victim of whom you spoke so eloquently! The whole of one's attitude to life depends on whether this strikes one as a joke or not. If not, you are the "goat."

It has been suggested that when Mr. Balfour came over to this country, saluted by Mr. Wilson as the Saviour of Democracy, urged him to make sure of the war loans, and cast flowers and tears upon the tomb of Washington, the wily Scot was playing just this joke. Mr. Wilson's high seriousness fits him to be a victim, and Mr. Balfour's humor is of just this order.

But that any one in the world should believe Balfour a democrat is almost inconceivable. I have a very great respect for Mr. Balfour. His uncle, Lord Salisbury, was called "a lath painted to look like iron"; but Miss Arabella is iron painted to look like a lath.

There are only two theories of government: Socialism and Anarchism. Most existing states compromise. But "in the last analysis" (good phrase, that! I wonder why no one ever used it before), the one runs quite amusingly into the other. The excessive individualism of this country has created trusts so large that a single step further would turn them into state-owned concerns. Similarly, socialism always topples into anarchy the moment it becomes universal. A man is not very much hampered by being called an official of the state: what he loses in one way he more than makes up in another. The form of government makes little odds to a nation, so long as wolves have teeth, and lambs have fleeces.

But there are three inestimable treasures in monarchy; yea, four things joyful which other systems do not give.

Firstly, one knows pretty well who the king is; if it be not himself, it is his mistress or his barber, which may be even better.

Secondly, the king is a human being like oneself, not an unassailable abstraction. Theoretically, one can approach him and obtain a request. Even a refusal is better than a beating of the air; at least one knows where one is. But one cannot ask favors of a Cosmic Urge or get the ear of an Economic Trend.

Thirdly, one can estimate the situation of the moment; one can judge of human actions, even when they are monstrously inhuman. Committees have no soul to damn, and no body to kick; so they are capable of actions which are not human at all, in any proper sense of the word. Even their most admirable laws lack the human touch. Who would not rather be a beggar dependent on the careless generosity of drunkards and prostitutes than a well-fed pauper in a workhouse? The first may (by a miracle) get a five or ten dollar bill now and again; the second is shorn clear of hope; his fate has become visibly ineluctable; he can see clear down a well-swept avenue of slavery all the way to the Mausoleum.

Fourthly, when a king becomes intolerable, one can cut his head off and get another, with some hope of gain by the change. But all committees are on the same dead level of heartlessness and stupidity. It is in such forlorn vestiges of democracy as Congress that the expert sleuth can trace the wailing ghosts of the Social Contract and the Magna Charta. We are still in that same slave-minded condition where we feel the necessity of explaining our actions to others. We dare not drink beer without some sort of medical excuse; we excuse ourselves for love on eugenic grounds; in other words, we are all afraid of each other. It was not enough to elect our best and bravest man to the Presidency; he felt bound to explain what needed no explanation, and naturally he has failed to convince a great many people. "L'etat c'est moi" can only be answered by the lie direct. To give one's "reasons" is to appeal to reason; and reason happens to be a kind of interminable game of chess in which neither side can win. Reason has not yet decided so much as whether we exist at all.

In all crisis a dictator is a necessity. Gallipoli was a better bet than Salonica; even disaster is preferable to inaction. Fabius "qui cunctando restituit rem," has been represented as a slow-moving person by such imbeciles

as the modern Fabians, who impudently took his name. No: Fabius was an exceptionally quick individual; it was the enemy in whom he induced the slowness.

Committees inevitably mean delay. The rules of debate, the rights of the minority; the whole conception of such bodies is to hear all sides, to thresh everything out, to fight every detail to a finish. And there is this particular purpose in view — to check autocracy.

In peace-time, in matters of no urgency, this is well enough. In war it is comic. Soldiers voting upon their next manoeuvre is, of course, the *reductio ad absurdum*.

Why then do we not take our own common-sense psychology to heart? Why do we not realize that, whatever may work in peace, we must have the "benevolent despot" in war-time? Because we fear that he may use his power to enslave us after the victory. Free men should not suffer such fear; they should rely upon themselves to supply a tyrannicide if need arose. While people are quarreling as to whether to build steel ships or wood, whether the people are to drink beer or nut sun-dae, whether a piece of bread should be buttered on the right side or left, nothing is done.

I happened to be in Eastbourne, England, a month or so after the war began. It was bad enough to watch the hordes of cigarretted slackers; but after all that might have been the indifference of courage. What struck me as symptomatic of sheer rottenness was the regiment of tub-thumpers howling out the advantages of their competing brands of religion and ethics. In war one needs a crude belief (like Mohammed's or Mr. Roosevelt's) in some equivalent of Thor. People who cannot shed their civilized criticism, for the time being, will not make good soldiers. If one were to analyze the pacifist, one would find him as a rule, an over-educated man, a man the slave of his own reason, unable to become a savage when the occasion arises for dealing with savages. One must fight fire with fire. Hence we find the bench of bishops in England opposing reprisals for the

air raids. Leave it to the "atheistic" French to kill 200 school children in Karlsruhe!

For three years I have fought against muddle and hypocrisy. We should not pretend that it is possible to fight with kid gloves on. If we killed our prisoners, and cooked their hearts and livers to give us courage, it would be no worse; and we should know where we were. War under Queensbury rules is not war at all, because there is nobody to exact any penalty for the breach of these rules. "Atrocities" is a good cry when you have a referee who can award you the fight on a foul; in a tussle with another savage for life or death, the cry is simply the wail of a weakling. Now that the referee, Uncle Sam, is in the war himself, we can at least stop this, and become as "atrocious" as the English in Ireland and South Africa, the Russians in Finland, the Italians in Tripoli, the Turks in Armenia — is there any one stupid enough not to see what St. Paul saw? "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

So now we have what has been always admitted to be the best of all possible governments — a benevolent despot. There is nothing personal about it. It is the will of the people incarnated in a single mind. It is the apotheosis of democracy. The arrangement is exceedingly convenient in other ways. It solves the puzzling problem of the name for this particular section of the American continent. *Wilsonia* is neat and easy to remember; and it has further the advantage of sounding like an apartment house in the Bronx. To make things pleasant all around, the wilder parts of the country might be called, on the South African analogy, the *Roose Veldt*.

But whatever may be the powers exercised by any government, there is one thing which cannot be done without a revolution. That is to interfere with the customs of the people. A custom may be the silliest superstition, or the most deleterious habit, but it is inviolable. History is full of examples of tyrants who fell because of attempts to interfere in such methods. I almost wish I

had not forgotten my history, because I would like to quote a whole lot of examples. However, history is all lies: it will be just the same if I invent a few cases. Timur Bukh was assassinated by a child of twelve years old in the midst of his victorious army, only a month after he promulgated his infamous decree forbidding the use of toothpicks. Mamilius tried to alter the date of the festival of the God Runtum, and his dynasty crumbled in an hour. The emperor, Chwang Myang, lost his throne through forbidding people to feed goldfish on oatmeal as formerly.

As a matter of fact there is a recent and rather terrible case, the Sipahi Mutiny in India. The entire country had submitted uncomplainingly to all sorts of tyrannies and exactions. But as soon as the Mohammedan thought that he was to be compelled to defile himself with pig, and the Hindu with cow, there was an immediate outbreak. It is impossible to alter by an act of legislation those deep-seated customs which refer to the satisfaction of the primary needs of men, the need to support life and the need to reproduce it. It is notorious that a food riot is the most terrible of all the danger signals.

But interfering with those customs which contain reference to pleasure is even more dangerous. The man of the common people has so little pleasure in his life. It is as crazy as it is criminal to attempt to remove the little he has got. Robbing the poor man of his beer is a desperate adventure.

If prohibition were enforced in any State, revolution would instantly follow. Trouble does not arise in dry States under the present system, because in addition to pleasure of drinking you have the pleasure of thinking that you are putting one over on the law. It is humiliating to reduce men to school boys. I shouldn't care to do it myself; but I dare say it is good fun for those who like it.

To attempt any such change in war time is entirely suicidal. I am perfectly convinced that the prohibition of vodka was the determining cause of the Russian revolution. If any Russian peasant does not understand political economy; he knows scarcely more than the average professor of that subject in a university. But the story was put about that the Germans had mutilated his ikons; and that put him into a baresark rage, although it did him no manner of harm.

The whole history of popular warfare is that of the attack and defense of sacred symbols, or superstitions, or customs, that could not be rationally defended for a moment. I do not know whether I like beer or not; for as it happens I have never tasted it. But I value my option. If any one comes into my office, and forbids me to drink beer, one of us has got to die. Any person not similarly irrational and violent has no just title of the name of man.