

CANT: POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS.

Chant and Cant are slightly varied forms of the same word signifying *song*. Language flows like a stream; and the meaning of a term sometimes, like the course of a river, will divide into branches, the one passing through regions of cheerfulness, joy and melody; the other along a dreary district of profession, falsehood, and hypocrisy. The service of the Church in old times was performed in a tone raised above, and prolonged beyond, the ordinary mode of speaking; perhaps originally for the purpose of making a large and partly distant auditory hear better. This practice occasioned the simple forms of musical notation, and afterwards led to the elaborate harmony of cathedral worship. An association of sacredness was thus connected with this peculiar mode of enunciation. The tone employed by the monks was imitated by beggars who asked for charity in the name of the Deity. The term "cant" came to designate their whining supplications, and from that very naturally passed to the language of pretension and hollowness, and that of an attempt at imposition. By an easy transition, it designated the technical terms used by particular professions. Words which wrested language from its ordinary application were called "cant terms," and at last an association was established between "cant" and whatever is hypocritical, glozing and attempts at cajolery, either in reference to things of earth or of heaven. Thus did the word fulfil its course, until the last meaning was widely divided from the first; as widely as the ebullition of a gladsome heart, the artistical melody that soothes the soul or thrills the nerves, or the song of the lark at heaven's gate, from the solemn mechanical tone indicating a task, in which there is neither heart nor soul, the meaning of the word either not understood or altogether disregarded, and the external repetition only awakening the suggestion of internal falsehood—that is to say, as widely as the difference between the feathered chanter of the field and the surpliced canter of the cathedral.

We owe the word, as well as the thing, to the Church. It has been the course of proceeding ever since there were churches in the world, to set up an artificial standard of goodness, moral superiority, and what is called saintship, and to include in this renunciation of much that nature commends as good, true, and beautiful to the common sense and feeling of humanity. Throughout the history of the Church there has always been something artificial connected with saintship; an intolerance of the simplest enjoyments of nature and the most genuine dictates of our intellectual and moral being. There is a cant in action, and a cant in words. Saintship has passed very much from the cant of action in ancient times to the easier cant of words in modern times. It was something in the old days to be a saint, as in the fourth and fifth centuries; it implied no little energy in a man. There was that great saint, Simeon Stylites, the pillar-saint. He did not earn his reputation so smoothly as the bustling members of our missionary societies. He was something like a saint! Think of him in comparison with some of our modern saints; he would look down upon them as Nelson from the top of his pillar on the pedestrians in Notre Dame Street. Now, a man has nothing to do but to repeat a few familiar phrases and pull a long face on proper occasions; to attend three sermons on Sunday, and two prayer-meetings on week-days; be present at the meetings of missionary societies; draw his purse-strings, and be zealous in sectarian movements; and he is reckoned for as good a saint as ever walked the earth—doing all by this easier cant of words instead of that old cant of action, which implied some nerve, and a really enduring and indomitable energy.

Among the various forms which canting takes, one of the most conspicuous is that in which certain solemn wishes and desires are repeated from time to time without any effort made to realize them. We are fully justified in calling by the name of "cant" a wish that is uttered a hundred times by those who never lift a finger for its accomplishment. As an illustration of this, we may refer to New Year resolutions of amendment,—the "turning over a new leaf,"—or the occasional spurts in the temperance cause; we need go no further back than what was called the "Rine movement;" how many members of our community publicly "resolved, and re-resolved," and how many of the converts have become *re-verts*. I say such a declaration so repeated is cant, and nothing more than cant. Why, it would do just as well if wishes and prayers of this kind could be repeated by machinery, be ground by steam-engines, or played by barrel-organs; or if they were like the devotions of the Calmucks, who put their prayers into a cylinder, and then turn it round with might and main, believing that the more heartily and the longer they turn, the more acceptable their prayers are, and the more likely to bring down blessings from their divinities.

There is an alarming amount of newspaper cant current, and the reporters have much to answer for on this head; beyond the stereotyped phrases, as the "devouring element" applied to a fire, and the "happy couple" when recording a fashionable wedding; why should a man everlastingly be "taken by surprise" when a testimonial is presented to him, and if taken by surprise, how is it that he invariably returns thanks in a few "well-chosen sentences,"—why, Mr. Editor, upon my honour, I have in my memory a case of this kind, of recent occurrence, where the recipient, to my certain knowledge, could not have said "Bo! to a goose."

Possibly, the place of all places for cant is the chapel of a gaol—that is its peculiar chosen temple; and the appropriate priests seem generally to be felicitously selected. The office is a not very desirable one, it is true—that of gaol-chaplain. It is said that the hangman is the best paid workman in the country, because he is exposed to the least competition. The administration of justice ought to know nothing of spiritual confidences, yet there generally springs up a sympathy between the chaplain and a person condemned to be hanged. Generally, too, according to the chaplain, the culprit gives most decided symptoms of divine grace, and what he even calls miraculous intervention. His prayers are most edifying, and his whole demeanour (we are told) is that of a child of Heaven, &c. If all that the chaplain says be true, in many cases, instead of being hanged, the condemned man should have been made a bishop.

Before dismissing religious cant, I may say that the very worst phase of religious cant is the parson who, with the name of the Saviour on his lips, exhorts his hearers to lead good lives, he himself setting so vicious an example that it may well be shunned by the meanest of his congregation. How many examples could we call to mind, both here and elsewhere. There exists a homily preached by one Thomas Hood which I commend to the notice of all canters. A few extracts may not unworthily serve to convey the deepest meaning:—

"A man may pious texts repeat,
And yet religion have no inward seat;
'Tis not so plain as the old Hill of Howth,
A man has got a belly full of meat
Because he talks with victuals in his mouth.
* * * * *

"I will not own a notion so unholy,
As thinking that the rich by easy trips
May go to heaven, whereas the poor and lowly
Must work their passage, as they do in ships."
* * * * *

"But must
Religion have its own Utilitarians,
Labelled with evangelical phylacteries,
To make the road to heaven a railway trust,
And churches—that's the naked fact—mere factories."

There are many phases of political cant which would fairly occupy another paper. One, which might almost be taken as a pleasantry, is—the responsibility of Ministers. On one occasion Sir Robert Peel told the House of Commons by no means to throw out the Bill under discussion—to visit him with punishment if they would, but at any rate to pass the Bill. He fell back on his responsibility. Now, I take that responsibility to be a very easy matter. It is just the responsibility of holding office as long as office can be held, and then being at the head of an Opposition. The Ministers in this country have often talked of their responsibility, and been threatened with their responsibility by Opposition leaders. It has seemed a very serious affair, and one not used to political language—political cant, that is—would think there really were crimes and accusers, and that by-and-by there would be impeachments and penalties, perhaps the scaffold. But nothing of the sort happens. Charles James Fox reminded Lord North of his responsibility through the American War, denouncing him and his measures for the violation of all constitutional privilege and natural right; and then when the time came, when the crime, if crime it was, had been completed, when the season for retribution and judgment had arrived, what did he? Coalesced with Lord North instead of impeaching him. After having for so many years called him both "fool" and "beast," the world saw him, as Canning said in his song:

"In spite of his real or fancied alarms,
Take the fool to his councils, the beast to his arms."

Pitt used to appeal to his responsibility when suspending the *Habeas Corpus* Act, when incarcerating innocent men, without any charge whatever, in gaol for years, when he was trampling on the liberty of the press, when he was wasting blood and treasure by wholesale, entailing on the country difficulties with which it has ever since struggled, and is struggling against even to this day—Pitt ever and anon appealed to his responsibility. And how was he held to that responsibility? Why, he died, and the people paid his debts and built a monument to his memory. Such is ministerial responsibility! If you want real responsibility, let a poor starving man, steal a loaf of bread from a grocery store, and you will soon find it. It is to be found for petty larceny; but for corrupting a whole people, and sustaining systems of fraud, bribery, and misrepresentation, for wasting human lives by thousands, for entailing misery on generations, for degrading a great nation, and impeding the progress of civilization, for all this there is no such thing, it is nothing but cant.

I have used Fox and Pitt as representative names. I might have come nearer home for my examples but we are taught from our childhood that it is rude to point at any one.

For the past two years I have written my "day-dreams" for the SPECTATOR, I am not conscious of having penned a line for its pages which I would wish to blot; as this will probably be my last appearance, I would like