

The Saturnalia

The first millennium was the age of gold:
Then living creatures trusted one another;
People did well without the thought of ill:
Nothing forbidden in a book of laws,
No fears, no prohibitions read in bronze,
Or in the sculptured face of judge and master.

—Ovid

During these few days of repose in the middle of winter it is said that the golden age descends once again all over the earth. I, for one, faithful though I be in most other matters, am doubtful about the truth of this legend, which the people hold so dear to themselves. Before I inherited this kingdom, my father, when he was on his deathbed, told me of a time long ago when all people were equal before each other and before the gods. Equality, he said, was the natural state of humankind. Inequality had arisen only because people had grouped themselves together with the purpose, unknown to them at the time, of creating civilization.

The abundant energy of the great masses could not be utilized, however, were it not for the power of a few who knew best how to channel their energies into meaningful projects. This, he explained, was the role of a leader, such as himself and such as I was soon to become, in governing the people. As my dying father spoke, he stretched his arms out around him and bade me to look at the wonders which he and the kings before him had accomplished with the labors of the masses. Overwhelmed by the sight of all the buildings, monuments, and temples which had been built, I vowed in the presence of my father to carry on the great works which he and my forefathers had begun.

The yearly feast is an important means of keeping the vision of a golden age before the minds of the people. I am bound, during the days of the feast, to declare no wars, even though war plays a vital role in securing raw materials and funds for our projects. Today, at the opening meal of the feast, I dined not in my own rooms as usual, but rather in the kitchen with my servants for a common meal, as is the custom. Many gifts were exchanged between the servants and myself. My servants serve me well. However, it is not out of any particular sense of gratitude that I give them gifts. I do so merely because I see the value of continuing the tradition of my fathers.

During the feast, those whom the inequality of civilization has burdened most are given a taste of the time to come when the golden age shall return—then, not merely for a few days of feasting, but for as long as people shall dwell upon the face of the earth. There is no other incentive to encourage them in their daily labors, hard though they may be, for they know that they work to bring about an age when neither they nor their sons and daughters will ever again have to toil. Even if they die before the dawn of this new age, they are comforted by the thought that some day their children, or perhaps their grandchildren or their grandchildren's grandchildren, will reap the fruit of the seeds they are so diligently sowing. Their only prayer is that they should be remembered for their hardships when the golden age arrives.

I do not believe that I, nor the kings before me, could ever have instilled in the masses the sense of duty towards the state which they now possess had it not been for the priests. These great men of insight have deepened the religious significance of the feast by explaining its divine origins again and again, how the ancient sages had prophesied the collapse of the first age of gold, the increasing deterioration and decadence which would lay hold of the people's hearts, and how the masses would eventually regain their primal state of innocence and equality, but only after much painstaking toil. No king could have ever convinced the people of the truth of what had been foretold. Only the priests could assume that function.

The kings, and I am now one of them, have full control over the masses, to be sure, with the priests and the members of the court to assist us. This is most necessary, of course, since it is really we who provide the workers with the impetus to create. Without us, the masses would do absolutely nothing on their own. We do not fear rebellion for we treat our workers well. They each have a roof over their heads and sufficient food to eat. We provide them with everything they need. They do not

care that they have no control over their own time. They have happily traded in their freedom for the benefits the state offers them. They are content with the hope that one day they will establish a golden age for themselves and their descendents. Truth be told, this is really what I am striving for as well: an age of gold for the *people*, the workers, for those who have given their all to the creation of this state, its continuation, and its culmination in a perfect existence for all humans. It has not been difficult at all for me to convince myself that I really do love my people. They certainly deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labors, even if for the present this enjoyment must be sacrificed to a greater purpose.

An incident occurred just two after the feast had begun, however, which has caused me to have doubts about everything I had been taught and come to believe. Sometime long after nightfall, an angry mob of citizens thronged outside my door, demanding that I pass judgment immediately upon a man they accused of blasphemy against the gods and against the state. Dressing quickly I went to the judicial chambers, fearing a riot if I dismissed the matter until morning. The guards brought the accused man forward along with a temple priest, who acted on behalf of the people as their spokesperson. At my bidding the priest began to speak:

“I address you, O King, with regard to this man standing before you now. He has spoken evil words against the gods and against the state. As you know, the gods are powerful beings, whom we worship because of the hope they give us in realizing a time of true peace and fraternity. Because the gods are powerful, we worship their power, as all people do, wishing also that the power of the gods may in some miraculous way be instilled in us their servants. But never do we presume to have attained the status of gods ourselves. You, O King, are indeed the most powerful among the people. Yet this man speaks of another power which extends itself beyond the power of our king and even beyond the power of the gods themselves. Is this not blasphemy? Do such words deserve not only the wrath of the people but also the wrath of the state?”

“Tell me,” I asked the priest. “What is this power the accused man professes?”

The priest replied, his eyes flaming: “As a priest, I have taught the people of that power which belongs to them—the power of meekness and humility, the strength which manifests itself in all those who obey. This is the just power of the people: any greater power they are not capable of. Nor is this man, this man who stands before you now, capable of any greater power than the power of obedience.”

“Then does he wish to command?” I asked. “Does he want to usurp me from my throne and rule over the people as I now rule?”

“No one in the kingdom would ever dare to commit such an act of treason. No one is capable of leading the people as you now lead them. In any case, even the thought of such treachery is well beyond this man’s grasp since, as you see, he is a mere commoner. Of what works can he boast, other than those which he has achieved under the state’s direction? Does this man not know what we are all working for—a return to the golden age, a time of comfort and prosperity when the people will no longer labor under the sun?”

“Well, let us find out what the man himself thinks,” I said. “Let the accused speak! You who stand before me now, do you not also wish to return to the golden age? Is this not the sum of all your dreams and desires?”

The accused man stood there in silence, refusing to answer. Even when a guard gave him sound thrashing with a whip, the man said nothing.

The priest resumed: “O King, if it pleases you that I might address you again, you can see that he will never speak. But he has made for himself the reputation of being a prophet and has gathered a band of disciples around him to propagate his teachings. He and his followers teach that the promise of a golden age is a lie, something invented by our noble kings and by us, the priests. Furthermore, he insists that our present work, all of our mighty towers and buildings, all that has been erected by and for the people, is the beginning of our own destruction. We will become a weak and worthless people, so he says, when our work is finally completed. The equality which we hope to achieve in the golden age will be nothing but a boredom to us. It will consume us. In striving for security, we will lose it, he claims.”

At this point the chief building supervisor asked to be acknowledged.

“If I might interrupt you but for a moment, kind priest, there are a few words of my own which I wish to share with the king. At one time, O King, this man before you was a hearty worker, accomplishing much more than many of the best of us because of his great muscles and strength. But one day he suddenly refused to work any longer. He tried to run away but the guards captured him. I

had him thrown into prison but the very next day when the guard went to bring him his food, he found that the cell was empty. The man had miraculously escaped! There were reports that he had run into the hills, where he was joined by those whom the priest has already referred to as his disciples.”

“Did you not try to capture him?” I asked.

The head guard, who was standing just behind the chief building supervisor, stepped forward and replied: “Of course. We scoured the countryside but could find no trace of him. Then he and his followers began appearing in the city, preaching to the masses. We were summoned by informers, those who are most loyal to you and the state, but each time as soon as we arrived to take the man into custody, he and the others disappeared into the forest. After many months of failure we finally traced their footprints to a cave where they were staying. They were living like savages, O King. Like savages! They had only the clothes on their backs and food they had collected from the forest. They were unbathed and filthy. Uncivilized in a word! The guards blocked the entrance to the cave and removed the men one by one. We tied them securely and then brought them safely back within the city walls. And now the leader himself has been brought before you.”

The more I heard the more I realized that I need not worry. Anyone teaching that the golden age is a lie would not be taken seriously by the masses. And who would trust the leadership of a man living in a squalid cave over that of a king in a splendid palace? Even if the man intended to overthrow the kingdom, that worried me little because I knew I had the full support of the people. My reign was secure. The priest, noticing my indifference to the matter, addressed me again:

“If I might speak, O King, concerning this man and his wickedness, I would wish to say that—”

“No, you may not speak again!” I said sharply. “I have heard quite enough. Do you doubt that I am a great king? As a great king I am also magnanimous. I do not feel threatened in any way by this man. I am sure that if he is given a chance, he will disavow his erroneous views.”

Then, turning to the man, I said, “Do you renounce your heretical teachings?”

Once again the man was silent.

“I am giving you the opportunity to repent,” I said with genuine benevolence.

The man looked at me defiantly and said nothing.

“But surely you can be reasoned with,” I said kindly. “Can you not see the truth of all that we hold dear? Now the people must suffer, but only because they are building a great kingdom, and once the kingdom has been built, they will all be able to live together equally and in perfect unity.”

I waited several moments for a reply, but none was forthcoming.

“He will not recant,” the priest said wanly, stepping back and allowing himself to be swallowed up by the crowd. At this point, a judge came forward.

“Respectfully, Your Majesty,” he said. “I have here with me formal papers of indictment. Might I read them to you?”

I nodded and the judge began reading:

“We the people of this fair city firmly believe in and uphold the principles concerning the great feast and the golden age to come. We do not wish to have in our midst any among us who does not openly adhere to and support these same principles. The man standing accused before you has openly admitted that he will no longer work in support of the masses or help them in their efforts to achieve these goals. He refuses to obey the powers that be and claims that all power comes from within each person, as if he were a god unto himself, that none ever have been or ever will be equal, that the only strength the masses currently enjoy comes not from themselves as individuals but only as it has been granted to them by the state. We the people regard such teachings as blasphemous. They are against the gods, against the state which the gods have ordained, and, moreover, against the unwavering beliefs of the masses. Consequently we wish to have this man removed from our society permanently. The accused has requested exile, together with his disciples, but because of the threat he poses to our very way of life, we the people insist upon punishment by death.”

When the judge had finished reading the indictment, he respectfully resumed his place among the people, all of whom anxiously awaited my reply.

“Indeed, this man is confused,” I said. “It may take him some time to recognize the error of his ways, but these are matters that can be rectified through our existing institutions. Certainly he does not deserve death.”

The crowd was silent for a moment and then a man in the back, hidden from my view, shouted

out, "Death to him!"

Another joined in, "The death he deserves!"

And another, "Death to those who place their own power above the power of the gods!"

The crowd had become hysterical. I feared a riot would soon break out if something were not done. Raising my hands for silence, their shouting slowly dissolved into murmurs and then ceased altogether.

"What do you say to these charges?" I asked the man. "You stand condemned not only before me but before your fellow citizens. Do you really claim that your own power is stronger than that of the gods?"

Finally, without hesitation, the man spoke: "The only power we have comes from within ourselves. No person has power over another."

"But I am the king," I said sternly. "Certainly I have power over my citizens!"

"The power is not yours."

"And why not, might I ask?"

"Because it does not come from within you."

"Of course, it does not come from me," I replied. "It comes from the gods."

"I do not wish to antagonize you, O King, but you are wrong," the man said. "We do not have power because the gods give it to us but because we give it to ourselves. The gods do not exist. We ourselves are gods."

When the people heard the man say this, they began shouting all the louder, "Blasphemy! Death to all who deny the existence of the gods! Death to all who refuse to acknowledge the king's power over us! Death! Death! Death!"

There was no point in arguing any further. I ordered the guards to take the man away to the dungeon. Then I assured the angry mob that due justice would be served. The crowd slowly dispersed and I returned to my room, hoping to catch a few more hours of sleep before morning.

As I slept I had a dream, which disturbed me greatly. I dreamed that I was guiding an ox through a field with a plow. We had turned over nearly all the soil and were almost finished with our day's work when the ox suddenly refused to pull the plow any further. I gave the ox a good lashing and managed to get him a step or two further down the furrow. But then he stopped again and said to me:

"Sir, you know the strength of an ox and you know that I am much the stronger of the two of us. But you have one advantage over me: I am attached to this plow and you have the whip. If you were to free me from my yoke and throw down your whip, we would soon know which of us is stronger. I no longer recognize you as my master. You should no longer think of me as your servant."

As soon as the ox had finished speaking, I awoke. It was still well before dawn but I could not go back to sleep. On an impulse I decided to leave my room and visit the man I had just had cast into the dungeon.

When I reached the entrance to the dungeon, I found the head guard quarreling with a citizen about visitation rights. They bickered for some time, not noticing that I was present.

"What is the problem here?" I finally demanded.

The guard and the man he had been arguing with turned and, seeing me standing there, immediately became silent.

The head guard finally said, "This fellow claims to be a friend of the man you had sent here tonight, O King. He insists on being allowed to visit him, as is the law. But under the circumstances, I told him he would have to wait until a judgment has been rendered."

"The guard is quite right," I said to the citizen. "Sentence will be passed in the morning and after that the prisoner will be allowed to receive visitors. But none before!"

Acknowledging that it was the king himself who had addressed him, the citizen fell on his knees before me, throwing his arms around the lower portions of my robes.

"O King!" he cried. "Please spare this man. Please spare him! He hasn't done anything wrong. Not really. Well, he did refuse to work and he did escape from prison, but surely these are not crimes which are punishable by death. His teachings have been misunderstood by those who accuse him. They are mere delusions, not heresies. Save him from his death, I pray you. Save him!"

The man's whimpering filled me with disgust. I felt no sympathy for him. But to preserve my

image in the face of the people, I treated him graciously, as befits my office.

“Get up! Please get up,” I said. “You know that I will judge him fairly. But tell me this: are you one of this man’s so-called disciples? Do not be afraid to speak the truth. Nothing will happen to you, for you are not the man on trial and I merely want to know.”

“O King, I tell you this in all honesty,” he replied. “At one time I was a follower of this man, but I am no longer. I listened for long hours to his discourses on the failings of the kingdom and the type of people he wished we could become. But I was not cut out for it. He wanted us all to be strong in ourselves. He taught us that humans are by nature not the same but unequal, each possessing different powers and abilities. He wanted all of us to develop our own talents, to excel in the things we each did best, even if that meant having to forsake the work assigned to us by the state. That is why he wanted to found a community far from the gates of this city, a community without leaders, in which each member would contribute his own fair share, doing what he did best and whatever he wanted to do most.

“‘Once we have built ourselves shelters and provided food ourselves,’ he would say, ‘what is the use in simply expending our labor on meaningless projects, however grandiose they might be, such as the public monuments and arenas we are building now? We should enjoy life and take up some trade or craft that will bring both us and others pleasure. We do not need the state to guide us.’

“That’s the way he used to talk. He said that the problem with our state was that we were producing too much—and to what end? We had so learned to work that we had forgotten how to live.

“‘Everyone in the city is well-fed and well-housed,’ he told us. ‘It would take but a minimum of labor to sustain us as we now live. The trouble is that everyone, especially the king and his court, want more and more. But we need not work for more and more if we already have enough!’

“But all this talk isn’t for me, I tell you. I am not a god but a mere human being. I have no power in myself. Whatever power I have is given to me by the gods. I am thankful for the opportunity to work on the state’s projects. What would my life be without my work? And I know that every ounce of labor I expend is a step toward ushering in the golden age. That is my dream and that is the dream of the people.”

“And what,” I asked, “does this man have to say about the golden age?”

“He said that it will never come about. He said that the work would never be finished. ‘We should have stopped long ago,’ he preached. ‘We will become so accustomed to working that we will not know when to stop.’”

“Those are his exact words. He told us that we were simply trying to make things secure for ourselves, as if security were something that we had to strive for rather than something that we have already attained. But he also had a curious teaching that somehow in our search for security, we were actually making things less secure for ourselves. I never could quite understand him on that point, but it really doesn’t matter anymore, because I am no longer one of his followers. I am still one of his friends, however, and that is why I came here to see him.”

“But don’t you think that the teachings of this man are a danger to the state?” I asked. “Perhaps he should be punished with death for infringing on the good sense of the people. After all, if what he advocates becomes a reality, what will happen to our way of life?”

“Well...sir...O King,” the man stammered. “Besides the fact that he is a dear friend of mine, I do not think it would really be in the public interest for him to be executed. You can take my opinions for what they are worth, but he told us before they came for him in the cave that he would surely be put to death for his cause. He told us that this would be a sign for us to continue in our efforts: to run away if we must or to overthrow the system if we could. I am sure that his death will only cause the rebels to rally all the more, knowing something of their ways.

“But there is something else that bothers me. He was always something of a visionary, or so he thought, and he always had fantasies about dying a martyr’s death. He was always attracted to anything that had to do with misery, pain, tribulations, and the like. That type of thing seemed to give him a perverted sense of pleasure. He always reveled in his own suffering and in the suffering of the people. That is probably why he saw himself as some sort of a deliverer. People who think they are saviors of one kind or another always have a tremendous need for suffering it seems, and he was no different. Death to him would only be the ultimate form of suffering, the culmination of all that he had ever dreamed of. That is why I was hoping to see him just now—to try and talk him out of it. Perhaps he would recant and save himself. That would be better than thinking he was in some way saving others!”

“Of course,” I said thoughtfully, “if he renounces his teachings, all would be well. Let me go to

him now and see how matters stand. And thank you very much, too, for your most informative remarks. They may prove to have some bearing on the case.”

I hastily bade the citizen farewell and descended with the head guard to the prisoner’s cell. We found him sitting upright on his mat, completely awake, as if he had been expecting us. The jailer opened the door and I entered the cell.

“That will be all.” I motioned to the guard to leave. “I can handle matters quite well on my own.”

The jailer departed and resumed his post at the main entrance. I looked down at the prisoner and was surprised to find him in a quite complacent mood, having no trace of the defiance I had expected to see in his face.

“I have just had a most interesting conversation with one of your former disciples,” I began. “He explained many of your doctrines and teachings to me. I can’t say that I found anything particularly striking about them, but I am very curious to know why you are so dead set against the manner in which the government is handling the state. Surely you are aware that we have the citizens’ best interests at heart. And regardless of your own religious convictions, you must know that there is a great deal of redeeming social value in the ‘story,’ let us say, of the golden age to come. All of the things you cherish most in your own peculiar way of thinking are surely attainable within the system we are presently advocating. It almost seems that you agree entirely with our goals and methods—you just want to speed things up a bit. You are not a reformist, but a revolutionary. Is that it? No, we are planning things carefully so that everything will be gradually provided for, step by step. Surely you must admit that the method you propose for achieving your ends is a little haphazard, wouldn’t you?”

I paused for a moment, giving him a chance to make some reply. He remained silent.

“All right,” I continued. “Let us assume that this whole business about a golden age which will supposedly come sometime in the future is nothing but the product of wishful thinking. I almost believe that myself. But still, the people right now are happy doing their daily chores! They feel they are accomplishing something. Would you deprive them of that? They are relatively comfortable. They all have homes to go to at night and spouses to succor them and children to bring them joy. Eventually we will get around to building better homes for them, of course, and perhaps at some point in the not-too-distant future we will be able to give them a bit more leisure time, too. But now they are content. They are like a happy herd of cattle. They do not have to think for themselves! Even that is taken care of for them. Everything is fine just the way it is. Why do you wish to disrupt things? To what end? For what purpose?”

I hesitated again, thinking that the man would surely seize the opportunity to answer me. I expected furious words to pour forth from his mouth, but once more he simply sat there in silence.

“I am a leader, it is true,” I resumed. “And it is true that I live in more elegant surroundings than the masses. I have more leisure, more time to devote to the arts. I eat better food. But it is me who provides direction to the people. It is me who really gives them a reason for living. In one sense you might even say that the only pleasure they have in life is serving me and it is me who gives them that pleasure. I am a powerful man, as you know. I have the power to give you a reason for living and the power to have you put to death. Which do you choose? If you will but admit that it is I—your king—who controls your existence, who gives your life its meaning and purpose, I will set you free. And you will be free indeed! For I shall provide for you, take care of you, give you work to do, and set food on your table.”

Suddenly the man stood up. All the wrath that I had long expected him to vent finally came out:

“You shall never give my existence its meaning! That is something which I can only do for myself. You have never given meaning to your own life, so how can you presume to give meaning to the lives of others? You say that you are a powerful man. But from whence comes your power? Does it come from within yourself or has it merely been granted to you by the title you bear? You claim to have mastery over others, yet you do not have mastery over yourself. Because I have mastery over myself, I do not need to exert mastery over others. Even though you prattle and prance about, and act as though your power comes from the gods, you in fact have no power. I am accused of being an atheist, but it is you who are the atheist because you no longer believe in the god within yourself. It has shriveled up into nothingness. But I am a god. A god in the flesh! I believe in the god within me and it is this which gives me my power. Would you care to match your power—the power of your inheritance and your godless body—with the power that is within me? Would you, a powerful man, yet nothing more than

a human being, care to wrestle with me, a god?"

I was stunned by his outburst! He must surely be mad, I thought, a frenzied spirit having no idea what he was saying. I tried as best I could to maintain a calm presence, but he continued to taunt me: "Wrestle with me! Are you strong enough to wrestle with a god? Where, O Most Powerful Man, is your power now? How can the power of a mere mortal compete with the power of a god?"

"Are you challenging me to a fight?" I stammered, finally losing my composure.

"That's it," he foamed. "Fight with a god! Don't be a coward, who is always boasting about what mighty power he has. Prove it to me right now! Wrestle with me and we shall see whose power is stronger!"

As he hurled his sneers at me, he flexed his muscles. They rippled down the entire length his arms and across his chest. I in turn let my robe drop to the floor. The two of us squared off in the cell.

The match was over before it had hardly begun. He very quickly lifted me high into the air, until I nearly touched the ceiling, and then threw me down to the hard stone floor. I landed with a thud. At once he was on top of me, pressing me to the ground. His face was in my face. I could smell his breath as he shouted at me, "Behold the wickedness of man and the triumph of the gods. Any man may become a god simply by recognizing that he already is one. But he until he realizes the power within himself, he should never contend with an all-powerful god."

The man's cries had aroused the jailer, who rushed into the cell, his whip in hand.

Tomorrow the great feast will be over. All executions have been postponed until then. Tomorrow the accused shall die. Tomorrow a god will be dead.

Next year we will enjoy the great feast a little more at ease. We will continue our efforts to usher in the golden age, an era of wonders in which everyone will be equal, the masses will be at peace, and all people will live together in harmony.