

## MACHIAVELLI

*THE STATECRAFT OF MACHIAVELLI*, by *H. Butterfield*  
(*Bell*, 6/-).

Mr. Butterfield's study of Machiavelli is something less than satisfying. The exposition is careful, the reference to contemporary conditions consistent and accurate; and yet, at the end of it all, the answer to the essential question—why we read Machiavelli—has somehow eluded us. This Machiavelli—so concisely, so economically presented—is viewed from Cambridge with a Liberal and mildly disapproving eye; he turns out, allowing for the scholar's superior detachment, not to be so unlike the Marlovian caricature. The truth is that Liberalism such as Mr. Butterfield's does not readily ask itself ultimate questions. It regards political thought either with scepticism arising from a conviction of relativity in all things or with faith in the inevitable unfolding of social progress; in either case it finds Machiavelli's estimate of political phenomena discouraging and distasteful. Machiavelli is too uncompromising, too absolute for Mr. Butterfield, who scarcely disguises his preference for the infinitely more flexible and unprejudiced mind of Guicciardini; but in preferring it he does not always do justice to that greatness of quite another order which Machiavelli certainly possessed.

Mr. Butterfield's book—to make the point more clearly—suffers from excessive concentration upon the Prince, upon his ruthlessness and cunning. It suffers, that is to say, from a false emphasis. The empiricism of Machiavelli, unlike that of Guicciardini, is the servant of a strictly personal interpretation of politics. Machiavelli is a political theorist led by circumstances to a deep consideration of political fact; and his practical advice, as Mr. Butterfield justly notes, suffers from the rigidity imposed by an inflexible mind upon intractable material. Machiavelli habitually reduces political conduct, which more often demands infinite tact and a continual adaptation to fluctuating circumstances, to a choice between precise alternatives. The Prince is told that his subjects must either be 'courted' or 'extinguished' ('bisogna o vezzeggiarli o spegnerli'), that he must either be successful and unscrupulous or virtuous and a failure: that the middle path, without saving moral credit, leads invariably to disaster. The appearance of detachment in these

observations is largely illusory. The alternatives exist less in the external world than in the writer's own experience. Machiavelli's logic, apparently so dispassionate in its findings, is really the servant of a mind which (being, as Mr. Butterfield remarks, "too much the master of what it has once assimilated") expresses itself most naturally in rigid antithesis. This tendency to dramatise the conflicting and contradictory is mainly determined by his sense of the gap between inherited theory and contingent fact. Believing in the State as a necessary condition of the *vivere civile*, of the social existence of man, Machiavelli was appalled by the conditions of sixteenth century Italy and by his conviction—perfectly clear-cut and supported by a coherent philosophic outlook—of the political shabbiness of the human species. To bridge the gap between these facts, as they appeared to him, and the belief in civil institutions which they seem to nullify: to establish the body politic—threatened in his own time with crisis and anarchy—on a basis not merely theoretical but actual and strong: this is the real scope of Machiavelli's work. From it emerges the figure, clearly conceived and intensely dramatized, of the Prince.

There is nothing particularly original about Machiavelli's conviction of the necessity and beneficence of an ordered society. Dante, who had derived it from the Schools and so, ultimately, from Aristotle, assumed it in the *De Monarchia* and confirmed it through Beatrice in the *Paradiso*:

Ond'elli ancora: ' Or dì: sarebbe il peggio  
per l'uomo in terra, se non fosse cive?'  
' Si,' rispuos'io, ' e qui ragion non chiegio.'

(Canto VIII, vv. 115-117.)

But Dante assumes that the civil order, besides representing a positive good on earth, was expressly created to anticipate the harmony of heaven. Machiavelli can make no such assumption. Writing in the *Discorsi sopra la Prima Deca di Tito Livio* on the origin of authority among mankind, he says: ' The variations of government grew up *fortuitously* among men, because in the beginning of the world, its inhabitants were few and lived for a long time dispersed *after the manner of beasts*; then, as they increased they came together and, in order to be able better to defend themselves, they began to look for the man who was strongest and of

best heart among them and made him chief and obeyed him. *And from this was born the knowledge of things honest and good.*' (Book I, Ch. ii.). Dante and Machiavelli agree—it is the measure of their common tradition—in associating political consciousness with ethical maturity: in almost everything else they are poles apart. For Machiavelli the various forms of government, which Dante had regarded as willed by God to play their part in the formation of the Christian order on earth, arose *fortuitously*. This was their greatest weakness: for what had been created by chance could equally accidentally be destroyed. At the heart of Machiavelli's philosophy—which he shared with most of his contemporaries—lies a conviction that development and decay are aspects of a single and, on the whole, declining process. The State, and the Prince in whom its authority is vested, are engaged in a continual struggle against Fortune—that is, against a temporal process no longer assumed to be purposive or dependent on a divine will. 'All human affairs'—observes Machiavelli—'are in motion: and, since they cannot stand firm, they must either rise or fall.' (*Discorsi* I, vi.). The unfolding of time, thus reduced to an endless repetition, inevitably deprives all mortal affairs of meaning. Degeneration faces all political institutions, and the problem of the civil order, already solved for Dante by his faith in the providential institution of the Empire, becomes the problem of the State and of the conditions, now wholly natural, of its creation and maintenance.

Time, according to Machiavelli, dissolves the fabric of a state by bringing out the inherent selfishness which the acceptance of public order had for a moment subdued. In the universe as Machiavelli conceived it the notion of man's natural tendency to good cannot even arise. Born dispersed 'after the manner of beasts,' his natural condition is a brief and unfortunate one in which unchecked 'appetite'—to use Shakespeare's word—leads to inevitable anarchy. It is only when circumstances have forced him into social relationships that he begins, almost as though driven thereto, to conceive of 'things honest and good.' For the author of the *Mandragola*—that strange comedy in which the clear-cut representation of vice is raised by its very dispassionateness to the level of greatness—man's original bestiality, so far from having been overcome by civilisation, stands out even more strongly in contrast to his social instincts. Man's evil will, in fact, distinguishes

him from the beasts :

Non dà l'un porco all'altro porco doglia,  
L'un cervo all'altro : solamente l'uomo  
L'altro uomo ammazza crucifigge e spoglia.

(*Asino d'Oro*, VIII, 142).

In such a world allegiance to the State, by virtue of which alone man is a consistent moral being, no longer depends upon the unclouded exercise of reason but is, at best, a precarious thing. Machiavelli's low estimate of human nature admits of no compromise. 'It is necessary that he who rules a state . . . should assume that all men are evil and that they will always exercise the malignity of their spirits.' (*Discorsi* I, iii). The maintenance of the *vivere civile* now rests first and foremost upon the desire of individuals to overcome this natural bias to evil. In this desire, this will, individual and State give proof of their qualities, of their fitness to survive, in a word, of their *virtù*. *Virtù* is, in Machiavelli's thought, the supremely dynamic quality in a world where the will, acting perforce apart from any conception of motive, can affirm itself only in effective action. To be, like Savonarola, whom Machiavelli condemned, 'a prophet without arms' is to be ineffective and therefore lacking in *virtù*. For *virtù* is the capacity to act with decision, to impress one's character, otherwise doomed to extinction, firmly upon the impersonal flow of events. Its presence in the individual is measured by his devotion to the commonwealth, in the state by the firm maintenance of good and universally respected laws: for the law is simply the expression of the common will against party selfishness. And since the generality of men are given to selfishness, since their judgments are mostly to be respected only where 'life and property are concerned' (*Discorsi* III, vi), the will of one man is often—though not necessarily, and certainly not ideally—needed to keep them together by the force of his own *virtù*. That man, in the special conditions of sixteenth century Italy, is the Prince.

Responsible acceptance of just laws is, then, the essential condition of the *vivere civile*; and Machiavelli is prepared to support any ruler who will apply 'strong remedies' (*Principe* c. iii) where it has been refused. But this acceptance, to be truly responsible, must in the last resort be free: or at least, once imposed by

authority, it must be freely endorsed. Machiavelli, in accordance with his general view of man's political nature, treats liberty as something intricate and double-edged, a condition of vitality as well as a source of anarchy. For some states, including the Florentine, liberty is an intuitive necessity, sanctioned by long tradition and built into laws and established institutions. In the great speech in defence of their civic liberties which he puts into the mouth of the Signori (*Istorie Fiorentine*, Book II, c. xxxiv), Machiavelli is evidently moved by this intuition. His prose, assimilating itself to the great Latin authors whom he admired, gains grandeur and amplitude as he contemplates the rights imperilled by the claims of the Duca d'Atene:

‘ . . . avete voi considerato quanto, in una città simile a questa, importi e quanto sia gagliardo il nome della libertà, il quale forza alcuna non doma, tempo alcuno non consuma e merito alcuno non contrappesa? Pensate, Signore, quante forze sieno necessarie a tenere serva una tanta città? ’

Yet even here the dynamic quality of Machiavelli's thought gives the notion of liberty a subtle twist. Liberty as a force, an affirmation of individuality, is inevitably dangerous. For it is a force, even in the apostrophe I have just quoted, which makes itself felt in opposition to force, which cannot tame it, and time, which cannot consume it: a force, therefore, which is by nature active and might easily overstep the curb of law. Machiavelli himself, who regards disorders as the inevitable offshoot of liberty, argues that they may be beneficial to a healthy republic; for out of the clash between the people and the Roman Senate arose ‘not exile or violence to the detriment of the common good, but laws and orders’ (here he points to the creation of the tribunes) ‘in benefit of public liberty.’ (*Discorsi* I, iv). Yet from tumult and healthy disorder to dissolution is only a small step. Once the civilised, the distinctively human impulse, expressing itself in respect for laws whose justice is based on the common interest, is removed—and we have seen how transient, how exposed to change and circumstance this instinct is—liberty degenerates into licence and the commonwealth into a conflicting conglomeration of interests. The story of contemporary Italy was decisive on this point. The same Florence which had been so absolute in defence of its liberties, which had exalted them in its

laws and institutions, produced the factions which plotted against the Medici in the Congiura dei Pazzi and killed Giuliano because he stood in the way of their own ambitions (*Istorie Fiorentine* VIII, cs. ii-ix). Where liberty is allowed to grow into licence and self-interest wins in its continual struggle against the common good, freedom becomes a curse; and against this curse Machiavelli calls the Prince to apply his 'medicine forti' for the renovation of the commonwealth.

In its external relations the civil order is equally subject to mutability. The Machiavellian state is essentially a body situated, rather like the atoms in the fortuitous cosmos of Lucretius, among a number of other bodies. Each body, in its turn, is composed of atoms, of individuals more or less unified by their respect for the laws which bind them together; but between these bodies there is, for Machiavelli, no conceivable law, no instinctive community to prevent the domination of the weak by their more powerful neighbours. Each body tends to affirm its individuality, its *virtù*, by encroaching upon its neighbour; for *virtù* implies, as we have seen, action, force, the assertion of the individual will. Once more experience reinforces the findings of speculation. With his eye on the ceaseless rivalry of the Italian principalities, Machiavelli concluded that the only feasible alternative for any state is to expand or to submit, to conquer or to be conquered. Once more he is placed in the position most characteristic of his thought—the dilemma. He is faced with a choice between states—such as ancient Sparta and modern Venice—which are small, self-contained, and therefore stable, and others—such as imperial Rome—which extend themselves by conquest over their neighbours. An ideal state, demanding from each individual a high degree of *virtù*, a willingness to subjugate individual interest to the common good, presupposes a small and closely-knit society, such as the city-state of classical tradition. But such stability is contrary to the workings of Fortune, contrary, therefore, to the nature of things. For the state must, owing to its position, exercise itself in conquest, in the domination of neighbours who would otherwise encroach upon its liberties: but each conquest brings into the body politic new and discordant elements. Success in warfare only postpones a fate which failure precipitates. The process of assimilating new bodies of people can, given administrative wisdom, win a great measure of success. But

only within certain limits. Ultimately, the essential homogeneity of the social organism is impossibly compromised. Thus undermined by its own action, it falls a victim to the fatal process of disintegration. Meanwhile, however, it has at least revealed the *virtù* which is in it.

Such, very broadly speaking, is the speculative background to the figure of the Prince. I have insisted upon it, rather than upon the Prince himself, in an attempt to supply what Mr. Butterfield's study most seems to lack. Machiavelli's Prince—it cannot be too often repeated—is, by his express assertion, concerned with the 'principato nuovo,' with the establishment of authority in a society which has lost its respect for the laws upon whose acceptance the maintenance of the *vivere civile* directly depends. The argument of the *Principe* presupposes a community which has lost the political instinct, which is unable therefore to live as a free republic. That, in Machiavelli's opinion, was the state of contemporary Italy, and the resolute action of one man—the Prince—was needed to reverse what seemed to be a pre-determined process of decay. Machiavelli sees his Prince, in fact, as engaged in a struggle against Fortune, and he justifies his 'extraordinary actions' only if they are undertaken 'not to ensure his succession, but for the common *patria*' (*Discorsi*, I, ix). Machiavelli's enemies in our days frequently call him a Fascist, much as they formerly called him a Jesuit or a poisoner, but it is difficult to say—assuming that the speculation is profitable—what he would really have thought of our present situation. Perhaps we should be better occupied in considering how far his spirit—or that part of it which, as the expression of an intensely individual outlook, is still relevant—can reasonably be applied to modern questions. Machiavelli's pessimism is of a type not generally sympathetic to the Liberal mind; but perhaps it might, without necessarily imposing its own point of view, correct in that mind a certain tendency to be complacent about the possibilities of human nature. In any case, to have achieved a dispassionateness far from devoid of feeling, to have arrived at so great a conciseness of definition without bordering upon the superficial, is to show a greatness that claims respect. Certainly with his insistence upon responsibility in the individual, Machiavelli would have found little to commend in régimes maintained in existence mainly by flood-lighting, loud-

speakers, and recurrent wars; whilst, with his estimate of man as a political animal, he would have found the vast assumptions often insufficiently covered by the word 'democracy' scarcely comprehensible. Probably he would not have associated himself unreservedly with either side; but detachment is not always a sign of inferiority, and we at least—even in a time of crisis—might usefully meditate his conclusions.

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## SCOTTISH LITERATURE

*THE SCOTS LITERARY TRADITION*, by John Speirs (*Chatto and Windus*, 7/6).

Mr. Speirs has attempted, with a fair degree of success, to give the reader approaching Scottish literature his bearings in a tradition distinguishable from that of England. There are qualifications that have to be made. (The virtues of Mr. Speirs's work will be known to those who have read the substance of this volume as it appeared in *Scrutiny*.) The economy of treatment which appears to have been a principal aim results in a certain scrappiness. One has the feeling of being taken on an efficient but rather hurried conducted tour, the items to be inspected being arranged and labelled a little too neatly. And, as after such a tour, one wonders whether more might not have been done if there had been less anxiety to get over the ground. Material that would have been more in place in a set of longer and more leisured studies of individual writers has found its way into the book. Any such study of a tradition must of course be enforced by particular analyses and discussions, but it would have made for smoother reading if Mr. Speirs had got along with fewer sub-divisions.

Right at the beginning there is an unfortunate result of this method of arrangement. The *King's Quair*<sup>1</sup> is not the most suitable work with which to open an account of the Scots literary tradition, though it is the natural one with which to begin a short history of fifteenth-century Scottish poetry. It is not so much a great Scottish poem as a fine poem that happens to be written in Scots, or in a

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<sup>1</sup>Mr. Speirs's 'Quhair' is apparently a slip.