

The State of Pride

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I once spent an evening defending the wrong street. A friend had corrected the address of a bookseller, a matter on which neither my happiness nor my livelihood depended. I knew, almost immediately, that he was right. Nevertheless, I discovered distinctions between the entrance and the premises, between the former proprietor and the present one, until the shop seemed to occupy several streets at once. My friend yielded from weariness. I went home with the advantage, and bought my next book at the address he had given me.

Perhaps pride begins there: where a man can make use of the truth only after preventing it from becoming another person's gift. The mistake was small enough to correct in a breath; my defense required the greater part of an evening. I had supposed myself devoted to accuracy. Accuracy, however, had arrived without consulting me, and this irregularity in its conduct had to be punished.

We speak of pride as though it were an excessive estimate of one's worth. This explains the boaster readily enough; he inflates the account and demands that the world honor it. But the quiet man may keep impeccable accounts. He knows his weaknesses, admits his failures, even speaks of them with an exactness that astonishes his friends. Only one condition governs his confession: he must remain the person who decides what these failures signify. He can bear to be defective. He cannot bear to be received as such.

There is a satisfaction that belongs to work well done. The carpenter may look at a fitted joint with pleasure; indeed, I would rather buy his table than the table of a man who regards every evidence of competence as a spiritual embarrassment. Such pleasure can remain with the thing. Pride requires a further transaction. The joint must establish something about the carpenter which no subsequent crooked leg is permitted to disturb. A finished table becomes a certificate of exemption.

You will perhaps object that a person must protect his dignity. Certainly; there are people whose idea of humility in another consists in making him convenient to themselves. One need not place his judgment at the disposal of every loud voice, nor surrender his privacy to prove that he possesses no conceit. Yet a boundary can protect a life or preserve a portrait. The difference appears when an unwelcome claim is just. Then the question is whether I examine the claim or examine the claimant until I have found a reason to spare myself examination.

How resourceful one becomes in the latter employment! A foolish man must be wrong because he is foolish; a clever man must be wrong because he is vain. A stranger knows too little; a friend has presumed too much. The young lack experience, the old have lost their flexibility. Thus every road by which a correction might reach me is provided with a gatekeeper. I have sometimes admired the peace of such an estate. Nothing enters it except by permission, including the rain.

The solitary man congratulates himself that he has dismissed the audience. He no longer asks for applause, and consequently considers himself free. But perhaps he has merely engaged one spectator for life. This spectator follows him into his room, watches him refuse a kindness, observes the severity with which he judges himself, and awards him the distinction of needing no distinction. The theater is empty; the performance continues. It is exhausting to be both actor and audience, especially when the actor is forbidden to acknowledge fatigue.

Even humiliation need not disturb this arrangement. The proud man may find defeat more suitable than success. Success exposes him to comparison; defeat permits him to accuse the measure. He can contemplate the world from the height of what it has failed to understand. Yet there are also wrongs which deserve resistance, and losses which cannot honestly be called lessons. Pride's ingenuity consists in borrowing their dignity for occasions that require no such grandeur. It gives a disputed bookseller's address the gravity of a persecuted conviction.

Self-contempt offers a still more secluded accommodation. When I condemn myself before another can condemn me, I may appear to have abandoned every defense. But I have retained the bench. The sentence is mine, the severity mine, and even the refusal of consolation is evidence of my superior honesty. Whoever approaches with forgiveness is dismissed as insufficiently acquainted with the case. I shall suffer, certainly; I shall even suffer more than justice demands, provided no one imagines that I have received anything.

At this point my inquiry becomes inconvenient. I had intended to describe the proud man with sufficient precision that the reader would recognize him. I now notice how carefully I have arranged the light: it falls upon his face while leaving mine obscure. Even my admission that I too am implicated promises a certain distinction. A man who catches himself in the act may take considerable pleasure in the cleverness of the arrest. I must beware of acquitting myself merely because I have supplied the evidence.

There is an unfinished letter on my desk. It concerns that evening and contains, among other things, an apology. The difficulty has been to prevent the apology from becoming a defense of the person making it. If I explain how sincerely I value truth, I invite my friend to admire the virtue that resisted him. If I describe my distress, he must comfort me. If I analyze my pride, he must attend another lecture. In each version he receives the task of restoring the very advantage I profess to surrender.

What would remain if these explanations were removed? A few words, almost offensively ordinary. I was wrong; I knew it; I prolonged the argument. No account of my capacities, no appeal to the singular difficulty of my temperament. The letter would be almost too brief to justify an envelope. I find this disproportion irritating. So much inward labor, and the postman would carry away scarcely an ounce!

Perhaps this is why pride prefers the decisive catastrophe to the small correction. A catastrophe supplies an occasion for becoming remarkable; one can rise from it bearing an imposing

knowledge of oneself. A correction asks only that tomorrow one cease defending the wrong address. It leaves one's talents available, one's dignity intact, and one's friend free to think about something else. It is this last liberty that I have found hardest to grant.

The future is accommodating in these matters. I can imagine a day when I shall acknowledge the fault with such simplicity that even my friend will scarcely notice the greatness of the acknowledgment. Meanwhile, every postponed day gives me another opportunity to improve the occasion. I shall find the right mood, the right words, perhaps an hour when he is particularly disposed to understand me. His correction required none of these arrangements. My apology has begun to require a world. Yet the world I am preparing contains a curious omission: it makes no provision for his receiving the letter badly, or indifferently, and still being entitled to receive it.

I have folded the letter. Whether I shall send it is a question for which these reflections provide no substitute. While writing them, I have several times imagined the favorable judgment of a reader who would recognize that I understand pride. My friend, who might have received an apology this morning, has instead contributed to a philosophical essay. The envelope lies beside it. His address is correct.