On the Pleasure of Taking Up One's Pen

by Hilaire Belloc

Among the sadder and smaller pleasures of this world I count this pleasure: the pleasure of taking up one’s pen. It has been said by very many people that there is a tangible pleasure in the mere act of writing: in choosing and arranging words. It has been denied by many. It is affirmed and denied in the life of Doctor Johnson, and for my part I would say that it is very true in some rare moods and wholly false in most others. However, of writing and the pleasure in it I am not writing here (with pleasure), but of the pleasure of taking up one’s pen, which is quite another matter.

Note what the action means. You are alone. Even if the room is crowded (as was the smoking-room in the G.W.R. Hotel, at Paddington, only the other day, when I wrote my “Statistical Abstract of Christendom”), even if the room is crowded, you must have made yourself alone to be able to write at all. You must have built up some kind of wall and isolated your mind. You are alone, then; and that is the beginning.

If you consider at what pains men are to be alone: how they climb mountains, enter prisons, profess monastic vows, put on eccentric daily habits, and seclude themselves in the garrets of a great town, you will see that this moment of taking up the pen is not least happy in the fact that then, by a mere association of ideas, the writer is alone.

So much for that. Now not only are you alone, but you are going to “create”.

When people say “create” they flatter themselves. No man can create anything. I knew a man once who drew a horse on a bit of paper to amuse the company and covered it all over with many parallel streaks as he drew. When he had done this, an aged priest (present upon that occasion) said, “You are pleased to draw a zebra.” When the priest said this the man began to curse and to swear, and to protest that he had never seen or heard of a zebra. He said it was all done out of his own head, and he called heaven to witness, and his patron saint (for he was of the Old English Territorial Catholic Families—his patron saint was Aethelstan), and the salvation of his immortal soul he also staked, that he was as innocent of zebras as the babe unborn. But there! He persuaded no one, and the priest scored. It was most evident that the Territorial was crammed full of zebraical knowledge.

All this, then, is a digression, and it must be admitted that there is no such thing as a man’s “creating”. But anyhow, when you take up your pen you do something devilish pleasing: there is a prospect before you. You are going to develop a germ: I don’t know what it is, and I promise you I won’t call it creation—but possibly a god is creating through you, and at least you are making believe at creation. Anyhow, it is a sense of mastery and of origin, and you know that when you have done, something will be added to the world, and little destroyed. For what will you have destroyed or wasted? A certain amount of white paper at a farthing a square yard (and I am not certain it is not pleasanter all diversified and variegated with black wriggles)—a certain amount of ink meant to be spread and dried: made for no other purpose. A certain infinitesimal amount of quill—torn from the silly goose for no purpose whatsoever but to minister to the high needs of Man.

Here you cry “Affectation! Affectation! How do I know that the fellow writes with a quill? A most unlikely habit!” To that I answer you are right. Less assertion, please, and more humility. I will tell you frankly with what I am writing. I am writing with a Waterman’s Ideal Fountain Pen. The nib is of pure gold, as was the throne of Charlemagne, in the “Song of Roland.” That throne (I need hardly tell you) was borne into Spain across the cold and awful passes of the Pyrenees by no less than a hundred and twenty mules, and all the Western world adored it, and trembled before it when it was set up at every halt under pine trees, on the upland grasses. For he sat upon it, dreadful and commanding: there weighed upon him two centuries of age; his brows were level with justice and experience, and his beard was so tangled and full, that he was called “bramble-bearded Charlemagne.” You have read how, when he stretched out his hand at evening, the sun stood still till he had found the body of Roland? No? You must read about these things.

Well then, the pen is of pure gold, a pen that runs straight away like a willing horse, or a jolly little ship; indeed, it is a pen so excellent that it reminds me of my subject: the pleasure of taking up one’s pen.

God bless you, pen! When I was a boy, and they told me work was honourable, useful, cleanly, sanitary, wholesome, and necessary to the mind of man, I paid no more attention to them than if they had told me that public men were usually honest, or that pigs could fly. It seemed to me that they were merely saying silly things they had been told to say. Nor do I doubt to this day that those who told me these things at school were but preaching a dull and careless round. But now I know that the things they told me were true. God bless you, pen of work, pen of drudgery, pen of letters, pen of posings, pen rabid, pen ridiculous, pen glorified. Pray, little pen, be worthy of the love I bear you, and consider how noble I shall make you some day, when you shall live in a glass case with a crowd of tourists round you every day from 10 to 4; pen of justice, pen of the saeva indignatio, pen of majesty and of light. I will write with you some day a considerable poem; it is a compact between you and me. If I cannot make one of my own, then I will write out some other man’s; but you, pen, come what may, shall write out a good poem before you die, if it is only the Allegro.

The pleasure of taking up one’s pen has also this, peculiar among all pleasures, that you have the freedom to lay it down when you will. Not so with love. Not so with victory. Not so with glory.

Had I begun the other way round, I would have called this Work, “The Pleasure of laying down one’s Pen.” But I began it where I began it, and I am going on to end it just where it is going to end.

What other occupation, avocation, dissertation, or intellectual recreation can you cease at will? Not bridge—you go on playing to win. Not public speaking—they ring a bell. Not mere converse—you have to answer everything the other insufficient person says. Not life, for it is wrong to kill one’s self; and as for the natural end of living, that does not come by one’s choice; on the contrary, it is the most capricious of all accidents.

But the pen you lay down when you will. At any moment: without remorse, without anxiety, without dishonour, you are free to do this dignified and final thing (I am just going to do it). You lay it down.

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