

MODESTY

The Social Art of Self-Esteem

JOHN ERSKINE

MODESTY is a two-edged virtue. Like other virtues it has reference to a condition within us, but it is measured by an opinion outside. We may be honest or courageous, though other men don't think so, but we are not modest unless our neighbor feels we are. The word itself is a variant of moderation. The modest man is one who does not go too far in the value he sets upon himself. Sets publicly, that is. We may cherish great ambitions and recognize our own abilities, and yet be modest. In fact, the outward moderation supposes an inward confidence, or we are not modest but humble. Humility rises on the vision of our insignificance. Modesty is the social art of self-esteem.

The difference is greater than would at first appear. The Christian era tried to substitute humility for modesty, with strange results. For one thing, the two virtues became for most people hopelessly confused, and their names fell into inaccurate employment. We now speak of dress as modest or immodest—meaning sufficient or insufficient. Truly modest dress, of course, would be reticent apparel, not too rich or showy, not beyond the average requirements of the occasion. No

doubt one might put on nakedness for immodest reasons, to overemphasize oneself, but it is significant of confusion in the ancient virtue that we now see immodesty in too little rather than in too much.

Moreover, the practice of humility, as an end in itself, has sometimes produced effects which a modest man would deplore. The spiritual sense of insignificance, the following of a life of abnegation, have brought about for more than one saint a quite menacing popularity, a vulgar success which fosters temptations to pride. Those who renounce this world—that is, give up an active interest in their mundane careers—and let it be known that they do, find themselves objects of worldly attention. For humility, then, as for modesty, there must be a social technique. The wise Christian, to remain humble, wears a manner of worldly confidence. The wise pagan, to retain his self-esteem, is modest.

But humility is no longer one of our ideals. Like other parts of the Christian vision it has ceased to attract—indeed some aspects of it, the inward spiritual state, we now consider a fault of character to be cured by a mind-doctor. The doctrine that godliness is profitable, still makes friends, but the question

“What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?” suggests nowadays an inferiority complex. To those of our friends whom we find walking humbly, with God or with any one else, we whisper a bright word, “Courage!” And if the humble man already wears that manner of confidence just referred to, we now learn to distinguish it from the real thing; it is a veneer, a nervous reaction from his low estimate of himself.

To identify the great virtue of humility with inferiority complexes would be possible only for an age which has ceased to understand the Christian interpretation of life. If, as it seems, we have returned to the pagan mood, it is all the more important that we should understand the classical virtue of modesty. Let us be children of nature, but let us be wise. If harmony with the universe, if knowledge of our own being makes us brave, there are still our neighbors to consider—we must practise a decent respect for the opinion of mankind. Oddly enough, that very instinct which urges protest against our friend’s humility, urges more strongly against an overt expression of his self-esteem. He may fly across the world alone and unafraid; we know the feat is unique, and he knows it, but we like him to assume the manner of surprise that his fellows notice him. He may rise to political power through the charm of his personality joined with what we call luck, and we and he know there was never a prince in a fairy-story who owed more to a magic wand, but we don’t want him to show that he is aware of his destiny. He must behave so that we remain at ease, not over-dazzled, in

the presence of his greatness. We wish him to be modest—or, since the word is now confused and needs enlarging, we wish him to be modest and unassuming.

The pagan virtue of modesty once had in mind, no doubt, man’s demeanor not only before his fellows but before some higher beings. The Greeks were not the only people who were aware of the jealousy of the gods. A man might be as prosperous or as powerful as you please up to a point not easily fixed, at which the gods began to fear a rival and turned against him. If he was prudent, he would hide his success from heaven by at least an outward moderation of behavior. Perhaps he would remind himself that fortune came in cycles, and poverty would sooner or later follow his day of wealth. Perhaps he would give away a large part of his riches, that the lightning, as it were, might have less to attract it. In extreme cases his gifts might be anonymous. All this modesty had for its purpose to avoid the evil hour when heaven would reestablish the average of things.

But the modest pagan considered, as we do, the effect of our prosperity upon our neighbors. In the end they will not entirely like it. Against any creature or organization which emerges too far above the general level, all other creatures instinctively arm themselves. It may seem unfair or cowardly, but it’s nature’s way, and the prudent man reckons with it. It is hard they say for one woman to admit the superior charms of another, but not harder than for a man to concede greater ability or greater industry to another man.

When a famous artist dies, a writer or a sculptor, the wolves fasten on his reputation and try to tear it. While he lived he was too strong for them. Well, modesty is the virtue of those who as little as possible rouse the wolves in advance. The modest man, confident of his merits, hides them till he is gone. He bequeathes to his critics the privilege of discovering him. They will forgive his achievements if they can believe no one else, not even he, was aware of them.

It will be seen however that the modest man is very rare.

If the theory of the inferiority complex is as it were the epitaph of the virtue of humility, the art of advertising is the enemy of modesty. It is an error to suppose that advertising, as we practise it, has chiefly an economic justification; it is rather an expression of a philosophy, not new, but never before so widely held. Primitive man thought he could realize his desires by creating a simulacrum of the thing or state he aspired to. For him art and religion were almost identical; he dramatized his prayers. Our passion for advertising shows how primitive we still are. If we have a cigarette to sell we paint the picture of a man smoking our cigarette, and we display thousands of copies of the picture, that there may be many smokers. Sometimes we have recourse to literary arts. Since we hope that all the buyers will like our cigarettes and tell their friends, we ascribe to the phantom smokers in the pictures sentiments of satisfaction or even of ecstasy. These are our prayers. The savage sprinkles the ground with water to bring on rain. Sometimes it

does rain. Sometimes we do buy the cigarettes, to see if our taste agrees with that of the gentleman on the bill-board. To some extent there is a homeopathic control of destiny.

But the trouble with advertising is that once you are committed to it, you go further than perhaps you intended. It offers no room for moderation. Economically you are limited to what you can pay for, but after that you can build up publicity, which has no bounds. Here again we follow rather clumsily the incantations of the savage. If we were famous, people would talk of us or recognize our name when they heard it. Conversely, we hope, if people talk about us and know who we are, we shall be famous. But fame is related not to publicity but to modesty. To be famous you have to be known for something besides the fact that you are talked about, and the virtue of modesty begins in a well-founded sense of positive achievement. The modest cannot be accused of an inferiority complex. The merchant who is sure his wares excel is likely to advertise least and in conservative terms.

If the practice of advertising grows upon us, what sort of philosophy shall we have in another hundred years? We shall be surrounded by lovely art expressing admirable aspirations. Religion will advertise, the churches perhaps will fight off the lure of the films by rival illuminations over the door, schools and colleges may report the wisest remarks of their best educated pupils, and doctors may send us photographs of patients emerging from their office cured. But by that time our souls may be rather queer.

Perhaps we shall then depend upon so many outer props and guides of conduct that we shall have no inner life. Reality may have been displaced by suggestion. Perhaps the doctor who advertises his cures will have been educated in a medical school which advertises its training, and the training will somehow rest on previous advertisements of textbooks and drugs, and so on back to some original incantation, some magic word. In such a dream-fabric we or our descendants shall be blown like dry leaves in a wind. Our nearest approach to humility will be our fatalistic patience. Of modesty we shall have none.

Or we may save ourselves by becoming the worst kind of skeptics. We may forget that advertisements are to be interpreted as art and aspiration, and having compared the picture with the reality, we may conclude that all who advertise are liars. All, that is, except the most nearly modest. It is not a happy kind of salvation, to keep your soul through skepticism. It is not a complete conquest of reality, to deny the world of imagination and dreams. After all, the cigarette maker may be in love with his cigarette and moved like any other lover to outbursts lyrical and exaggerated. To call the lover a liar is to miss a profound truth. The lover is mad. He declares on oath that his lady is fairer than the sky with all its evening stars—which is as much as to say that the pen is mightier than the sword. You can't check up either statement. Where there is no common measure, there can be no moderation, no question of fact, no modesty.

Those of us who remain sane, however, and who prefer to keep our bearings in a complicated life by other philosophies than the skeptical, may renew our interest in that spiritual attitude which the pagans called modest. We may once more count that the highest success which is complete in ourselves and which therefore needs neither advertising nor applause. We may begin again to take thought for the manner in which we bear ourselves before our fellows, balancing the possible advantages of self-advertising with the probable loss in their esteem.

For after all, though we go through noisy phases now and then, modesty is a logical virtue for democratic people. The aristocrat will cultivate it as one of his accomplishments, a grace of the chivalric tradition, but the democrat needs it to hold his philosophy together. If you believe that human nature is in its possibilities the same, what is any success but a good use of favorable opportunity? Why be puffed up about it? The favorable opportunity does not come to everybody; if you enjoy it, you have occasion for thankfulness rather than pride. Of course, the good use of it is to your credit, but remember how many others would use it better if they had your chance. To profit by opportunity is the commonest of sense. Those who let the chance go by are blind; those who take it deserve no more applause than the hungry who have food brought before them and eat it. In other words the man who succeeds by luck, with no intelligent effort of his own, has as little to be proud of as the man who with no luck at all fails; and the man who has the luck

and avails himself of it is really not exceptional—he is only what the normal man in a sensible world should be. If he has faith in human nature he will remember that his neighbor might have done as well if their circumstances were reversed, and he will wish his neighbor to know that fact. Until he is in his grave, what is really impossible for any man? If the glamour of your success persuades your neighbor that you have some magic gift he never can share, then you have handicapped him; you have taken away his courage and closed a door. Modesty is that form of human kindness which behaves so that no success will handicap any one.

Or we may say selfishly that this virtue brings us nearer to our fellows, nearer to that general heart of the race from which comes our wisdom and our success. The Cæsars in their power consented to be deified, but they were afterwards assassinated. They may not have been such monsters as unkind rumor often reported, but to be removed from your fellow man is to be monster enough. The poet, the novelist, the dramatist, who write out of the life they have absorbed casually and naturally, are on their guard against any success which would prevent their mingling still, casually and naturally, with their accustomed people. Burns the poor farmer, drawing his inspiration from peasant songs, has an advantage over Burns the poet, back from Edinburgh with a literary reputation. Will the songs be sung so spontaneously in his presence again? Will he not try to be a farmer still, as little changed as possible? We are not surprised that

the greatest of English dramatists was the most modest. Until he died his companions hardly knew what a person Shakspeare was. They admired the plays, of course, but they could leave the performance of *Much Ado* or *Hamlet* and adjourn with the author to the tavern, where he would talk of their plays, not his, and listen to their adventures without a word of his own life. Even from a selfish standpoint, how clever of him!

Those who watch the literary pageant of our times know how widely distributed ability seems to be; everywhere young folks spring up with a promising book, story, play or poem. But after the first emergence, they are heard of no more. Sometimes they disappear quickly, sometimes they twinkle out through a series of dismal disappointments, but in any case they go. Why? Because they are young, and haven't enough to write about? They are too ready to believe this themselves; therefore they embark on an unnatural, feverish existence, "looking for material" as they say. But the trouble probably is that their success broke their contacts with the very life out of which it came. They began to think of themselves as too good for the world that produced them, and though they may not have moved away, they have severed some spiritual taproot and killed their art. Walter Scott, wise old giant, illustrated that modesty which is the merest prudence in any career. He began as a lawyer and was made sheriff of his county. He kept on being a lawyer, because after all he might some day cease to be sheriff. He

became a famous poet, but he kept on as lawyer and sheriff, because after all the fame might pass. He became one of the greatest of novelists, but he kept on being lawyer and poet, and he permitted no discussion of his writings in his own house; busy as he was with his pen, he would retain the point of view of an average gentleman. No wonder his countrymen said he met them all like a blood-brother or that his heart continued to fill with life to write about.



Modesty is a total virtue, practicable in all realms, not simply in social manners. Moderation in all things, said the Greeks. Certainly moderation in the spoken and written word. Art rebels at times against the principle of understatement, but the principle has its revenge. For a while we may be pleased at the stormy torrent of Carlyle's prose, but as soon as we get used to the noise we are a little bored. It asks slight aid of our imagination, it pays no compliment to our brains, it wants us only to sit still and be thundered at. We have our own critics to-day who with less than Carlyle's message to impart raise the same hubbub. But in art all thunder is liable to turn ridiculous; we get used to the trick of the rolled bullet behind the scenes. The modest style relies rather on the reader's help for its best effects; it tries to make art a collaboration; it knows that only on collaboration can a permanent interest be built; it remembers that the reader too creates.



You may ask whether there is not a universal and fixed standard of

modesty in matter of clothes—whether the bathing costume of 1890 may not have been in itself more modest than the one-piece suits of to-day. The answer is simple. Modesty always is measured by the opinion of our fellows at the moment; it has respect to the judgment of mankind, and that judgment is in some matters permanent and in others changeable. The modest style in art, the principle of understatement, seems to be permanent to the extent that the human mind functions the same way in all ages. Fashions in dress vary, for reasons hard to guess at. Dress is chiefly a form of expression, and it obeys the same laws as any other art. It should convey beauty and spiritual meaning without attracting too much attention to the technique, the method, the material. Above all, it should not imply criticism of our neighbors, or set us apart from them. What is a fixed habit of dress in comparison with sympathy and understanding and comradeship?

If we seem to say that modesty is the art of succeeding surreptitiously, perhaps we can very well let that definition stand. Success can be defined in terms of the spirit. In such terms, assuming the prime importance of our souls and our duty to develop our talents, we may say that modesty is the one wise art of boasting. To put only a name on a tombstone, with no legend and no dates, would be to take immortality almost for granted. Nothing further but to leave off the name. Before we are ready to let our works speak for us, our confidence in them must have become superb.

The READING ROOM

Joseph Anthony



HANDLE gently your copy of C. E. Montague's new novel, "Right Off the Map." It's loaded with explosives stronger than any that Gerald Chapman ever carried in his valise. Here is the deadly wit of Shaw's "Arms and the Man," minus the protective cotton-wadding of the pretty love story; hatred, cynicism, despair, all couched in suave good-mannered writing that never for a moment seems to lose its temper. . . . Mr. Montague has been meditating on war.

But far be it from the Manchester editor to reflect on any particular war, or any particular brand of statesmanship behind it. As one of the professional soldiers in his novel remarks, "All war is a beast, but each particular war that turns up is a dear." And so the locale of his story is the mythical country of Ria, where all the good folk are decent and law-abiding, and its neighboring republic of Porto, where people eat with their knives and have no sense of honor.

Among the leading citizens of idyllic Ria is Cyril Burnage, who loves his wife and edits a liberal paper called "The Voice." Mr. Burnage is distressed when gold is discovered on lands belonging to a powerful Mr. Bute, on the disputed

borderline between Porto and Ria, and when, immediately after,

there is a clamor for war. To make matters worse, Mr. Bute, who is a great patron of journalism and art, buys every Rian newspaper with the exception of "The Voice," and tidings come that he's going to take that one over, as well.

Mrs. Burnage, who is beautiful and restless and whose lips drip naïve sarcasms, feels that it is time for her husband to do something, and so Cyril delivers a ferocious war-speech. Later, he discovers that he was under two misapprehensions—first, the enigmatic Rose didn't prefer that particular form of action at all, and, second, it wasn't the Rian "Voice," but a Portan paper of the same name, that Mr. Bute was buying.

Among those who are transfigured by Mr. Burnage's fiery words is Willan, a professional soldier, clear-headed but undisturbed by any excess of imagination. Willan happens to know that the Rians' equipment is bad and their army disorganized, but he tackles his impossible job with cheerful competence. War is declared; the Rian press scorches the enemy with print; there is a battle—and by dint of heroism and great resourcefulness Willan manages to save some nine hundred of his