

## ON REVENGE

When I was a child, I was enormously sensitive to slights; my definition of slights was as broad as my sensitivity was deep. I trust my memory on this point because the child I describe corresponds so exactly to the evolved adult. I was also, then as now, rigidly proud, unwilling to show hurt or admit need. Pride governed my behavior. It precluded, to my mind, all show of anger (which seemed obviously retaliatory—by confirming the slight or wound, it gave satisfaction, I thought, to the tormentor). Anger was the show of blood that proved the arrow had penetrated. Moral or ethical anger (of the kind provoked by concentration camps) was exempt from these inhibitions. But most such focuses, like the camps, aroused terror rather than rage. I had, if I can judge by my vast catalogue of slights and my icily theatrical self-protective disdain, a vast suppressed rage.

It is hardly surprising that my fantasy life consisted mainly of dreams of triumphant ascendance. None of these fantasies involved action. My revenge fantasies were founded on contempt

for action, for any show of effort. Damage occurred without my apparent agency and perpetuated itself indefinitely: to need to wound or—as in the books I read—murder the enemy was to display the insufficiency of self, just as action proved the existence of hurt. My idea of revenge was to prove that I had not been hurt, or had somehow exacted hurt, which (as my fantasies repeatedly demonstrated) I had miraculously transformed into something intensely to be envied. My dream was to create envy: my idea of revenge depended on the object's remaining conscious and fully aware.

Mainly, I thought about the poems I would write. In my imagination, these poems would be of a greatness that compelled, in throngs of readers, a uniform amazement, the only disagreements arising out of attempts to describe this greatness or account for it. At some point, I became aware that such response had never, in the history of literature, occurred. But I continued to feel it would occur, it had to occur, because my own response to the literature I revered was so intense, so absolute. I was in such moments suffused with awe, which seemed to me utterly different from opinion (the latter garrulous, the former dumbstruck). I felt myself in the presence of an incontestable truth or universal law. Curiously, I was not annihilated by this awe, as I expected the enemies in my fantasies to be. In them, awe would combine with feelings of horrified shame, an awareness of wrongs that could never be made right, a sense of their own lacks and misjudgments. My revenge fantasies equipped my adversaries with sophisticated and discerning literary taste; they punished themselves while I simply and transcendently existed.

This scenario was always to some degree present in my imaginative life. It became my immediate response to all public and private failure, to scorn, to betrayal, but also to much smaller events and embarrassments to which such fantasies were wildly

disproportionate. But they were not simply balm. They were also fuel. They fed an existing desire to write poetry, transforming that desire into urgent ambition. They could not replace inspiration, or bribe it into existence, but they augmented inspiration with a driving sense of purpose or necessity; they animated me when I might easily have been paralyzed. It was for many years intensely pleasurable to anticipate the leisurely unfolding, over time, of revenge, with its just and glorious reversals of existing judgments and power relations.

Crucial to these fantasies was a premise of spacious or expansive time, in which the distance from the humiliated present self to the triumphant innate self could be bridged. The language of revenge depends wholly on the future tense: they'll see, they'll be sorry, and so on. Because time always seemed to me imperiled or in short supply, I did not expect age to influence what, in my fantasy life, must have been a theoretical attitude. And yet something has changed. The fantasies have vanished, and with them the tremendous surges of energy and stamina.

Something about actually attaining those ages at which, in every possible sense, time is likely to be short (or certainly rapidly diminishing) seems different from feeling constantly that one would be cut off unfairly or prematurely. In addition to that sense of expansive time, my fantasies required that my adversaries remain immutable, stable, frozen in my infinite future: the person soon to be devastated by my virtuosity and spiritual depth must be identical to the person who held an object about to be thrown at me. But my rivals and judges, like my friends and colleagues, have all been chastened and battered by time. Pity and fellow feeling have weakened vengefulness, or replaced it with a sense of collective, as opposed to hierarchical, experience, substituting an unexpected mildness and generosity for my earlier sternness and violence. These shifts have made the fixation on

*new targets a far less vigorous act—briefly rancorous but capable of generating no real energy.*

*I sometimes miss them, those immutable enemies and the power they conferred, as well as the myth of generous time on which the little raft of self seemed likely to be supported for many decades. But my fascination now with this subject is more pragmatic and anxious: how to supply those energies that were, all my life, fed by the passion for revenge.*

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