

Is pride a sin at all? The Oxford English Dictionary strikes a primly English note: “A high or overweening opinion of one’s own qualities, attainments or estate,” or too clever by half, the ultimate put-down in those bright arid islands where ignorance must be lightly worn.

Apparently, the Romans and the Greeks had other, by no means pejorative, words for it. The quintessential Greek, Odysseus, reveled in being too clever by any number of halves. Of course, neither Greeks nor Romans had a word for sin, a Judeo-Christian concept that the Germans did have a word for, *Sunde*, which Old English took aboard. Obviously, in any time and place an overweening person is tiresome, but surely laughter is the best tonic for restoring him to our common weeniness. He hardly needs to be prayed for or punished as a sinner. Yet pride is listed as the first of the seven deadly sins, and only recently – by accident, not design – did I figure out why.

Over the years I have taken some. . . well, pride in never reading from my own work, or appearing with other writers on public occasions, or joining any organizations other than labor unions. In 1976, when I was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, I promptly declined this high estate on the ground that I was already a member of the Diners’ Club. John Cheever was furious with me: “Couldn’t you have at least said Carte Blanche? Diners’ Club is so tacky.” A couple of months ago I declined election to the Society of American Historians – politely, I hope.

James Joyce’s “silence, exile, and cunning” is the ultimate in artist’s pride. But for someone politically inclined, that was not possible; even so, one could still play a lone hand, as a writer if not as an engaged citizen. Recently, Norman Mailer asked me if I would join him and two other writers in a reading of George Bernard Shaw’s *Don Juan in Hell*. The proceeds would go to the Actor’s Studio. I would play the Devil, who has most of the good lines.

So, out of Charity – Vanity? – I set to one side my proud rule and shared a stage with three writers and the fading ghost of a very great one; fading because Shaw can appeal only to those who think that human society can be made better by human intelligence and will. I am of Shaw’s party; the Devil’s, too, I found, as I began to immerse myself in the part.

In a very long speech, the Devil makes an attractive case for himself; he also explains the bad press that he has got from the celestial hordes and their Earthly admirers. The Devil believes that the false view of him in England is the result of an Italian and an Englishman. The Italian, of course, is Dante, and the Englishman is John Milton. Somewhat gratuitously, Shaw’s Devil remarks that like everyone else he has never managed to get all the way through *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Although I had my problems with the second, the first is the masterpiece of our language, and Lucifer, the Son of Morning, blazes most

attractively while God seems more arbitrary and self-regarding than ever, eager in His solipsistic pride to hear only praise from the angelic choirs, as well as from Adam and Eve, two mud pies He liked to play with.

It is Milton's conceit that proud Lucifer, a bored angel, tempts Adam and Eve with the only thing a totalitarian ruler must always keep from his slaves, knowledge. Rather surprisingly, the First Couple choose knowledge – well, she chooses it; lose Eden; go forth to breed and die while Lucifer and his party, expelled from Heaven, fall and fall and fall through Chaos and Old Night until they reach rock bottom, hell:

*Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in hell:  
Better to reign in hell than serve in heav'n.*

I first heard those words in 1941, spoken by Edward G. Robinson in the film of Jack London's *Sea Wolf*. It was like an electrical shock. The great alternative, I can do no other. Bright world elsewhere. To reign and not to serve. To say, No. This was my introduction to Milton and to Lucifer's pride.

I was brought up in a freethinking Southern family where pride of clan could lead to all sorts of folly as well as to exemplary self-sacrifice.

My great-grandfather sat for a whole day on the steps of the courthouse at Walthall, Mississippi, debating whether to go fight with the rest of the clan in a civil war that he knew could not be won, and for a cause that he despised. Pride required him to fight with his clan; he fell at Shiloh.

Fifty years later, in the Senate, his son defied the leader of his party, President Woodrow Wilson, on the issue of whether or not the United States should fight in World War I. The Chamber of Commerce of Oklahoma City sent him a telegram saying that if he did not support the war, he would be an ex-senator. He sent them a telegram: "How many of your membership are of draft age?" He fell from office, as they had promised.

There is a whiff of sulfur here, perhaps; but there is also the sense that one is the final judge of what must be done despite the seductive temptations and stern edicts of the gods. In the absence of a totalitarian sky-god or Earthly ruler, there is the always troubling dictatorship of the American majority, which Tocqueville saw as the dark side to our "democracy."

Very much in the family tradition, in 1948, I ran counter to the majority's loony superstitions about sex and fell quite far indeed. (This newspaper's [The New York Times] regular daily critic not only did not review the offending novel, *The City and the Pillar*, but told my publisher that he would never again read, much less review,

a book of mine: six subsequent books were not reviewed in the daily paper.) But pride required that I bear witness, like it or not, and if the superstitious masses – or great Zeus himself – disapproved, I would go even deeper into rebellion, and fall farther. Understandably, for the cowed majority, pride is the most unnerving “sin” because pride scorns them quite as much as Lucifer did God.

Significantly, a story that keeps cropping up from culture to culture is that of the man who steals fire from Heaven to benefit the human race. After Prometheus stole the fire for us, he ended up chained to a rock, an eagle gnawing eternally at his liver. Zeus’s revenge was terrible, but the Prometheus of Aeschylus does not bend; in fact, he curses Zeus and predicts: “Let him act, let him reign his little while as he will; for he shall not long rule over the gods.”

So let us celebrate pride when it defies those dominations and powers that enslave us. In my own case, for a quarter-century I have refused to read, much less write for, this newspaper, but, as Prometheus also somewhat cryptically observes, “Time, growing ever older, teaches all things.” Or, as Dr. Johnson notes, reflecting Matthew’s Gospel, “Pride must have a fall”; thus proving it was the real thing and not merely the mock.