

Pride

'In pride, in reas'ning pride, our error lies;
All quit their sphere and rush into the skies.
Pride still is aiming at the bless'd abodes.
Men would be angels, angels would be gods.'

'Essay on Man', Alexander Pope

We live in a time of intellectual arrogance. Man thinks he knows everything. The immediate cause of this is the stupefying progress of the last one hundred years. The intimate secrets of nature are being probed into and are yielding progressive fruit. The unthinkable has happened: man has careered off into space, has landed on the moon and has placed instruments there which are now relaying information of every kind back to us. This is only a first step. Space vehicles, not yet manned are now touring through outer space, circling around the planets, and taking photographs of them from comparatively nearby. Next thing those vehicles will be manned and will be carrying their human cargoes off on journeys into the outer stellar systems lasting years and going goodness

only knows where. All this is leading on to something special but what it is we cannot even guess.

Side by side with that, we are penetrating into the knowledge of matter. Already we possess a fair working idea of the atom which is the unit of substance. We know approximately what goes on inside that infinitely small body. We are aware that it is a universe in itself, imitating in design the solar system of which the Earth is a part. Our existing knowledge has enabled us to tap the hidden forces of nature. Nuclear power is already harnessed and holds promise of performance so great as to make us dizzy. On the plus side, this would place us in control of energy so unlimited that we could re-shape the Earth practically to our own liking. Then on the minus side it is alleged that the stock of nuclear bombs is already at this early stage large enough to devastate the world.

Of course those departments do not exhaust what is to be discovered. What wonder then that a man should become a little un-balanced. He behaves as if he were the cause of all that knowledge and power; that he has created it. He is convinced that he is destined to dominate nature in a still more extensive way, and that one of his future feats will be to produce human life, not in the common way of human generation, but directly by chemical reactions in test tubes. Here one has to comment that it is ironic for science to be thinking of producing new human life while at the same time concentrating on preventing it and destroying it through contraception and abortion. This apparent inconsistency is explained by the fact that the scientists do not really want any more life on the earth, especially as what they would produce might be monstrous – perhaps in the order of Frankenstein, without a soul. What they want is to give a supreme manifestation

of their own genius and prove incidentally that science is sufficient to explain the origin of man and the universe, and that there is no need to suppose a Creator.

They realise fully that so far they have only been assembling things and they desire greatly to do something which could be claimed to be a creating. The production of life from inanimate matter would have that appearance and that is why they have set their hearts upon it. But it is most certain that whatever they may eventually contrive in that direction, it will not be a genuine creation of life such as God effects.

But all that achievement and confident talk has had the result of turning heads not only of the workers of those wonders but of the general body of the people who are looking on with mouths wide open. These overlook the fact that all that has been done is only in the mechanical order. Man is only delving like a miner into what is already there and he has been so engaged since he was put on earth. He has been finding out things that he was intended to find out. He did not make those different items of science. He only discovered their properties and utilised them. Flight is only the utilising of the supporting power of the air, just as the boat was based on the supporting power of the water. The camera, television, etc. proceed from a knowledge of the laws of light. Space travel depends on the knowing of the laws of gravity and attraction. Electricity was always there, showing its presence in dramatic ways and practically pleading to be harnessed. And so on.

There is no creation in all that. There is only progressive discovery. Man has been walking along a pre-ordained path. He is only putting things together in a somewhat ambitious fashion than earlier man made a hatchet, a

wheel, or a bow and arrow; or in a later way that man utilised steam, electricity and the different rays. Man is only picking up those things and learning how to exploit them. He is threading his way through a complex system of forces and laws which were already there from the beginning of Creation. He has not made one of them. He has not made his own brain which is the means whereby he has done all that capable researching. He has not even a glimmering as to how that brain functions, nor why nor in what way it is different to the animal brain.

Man boasts of his inventions as if they were creations of his own. Also one would think from the style of his talk that it was a single individual who had built up the structure of a discovery instead of its being a long line of men, each one adding a little to what he had received from those before him in the line. One of the most intriguing features of humanity is the helplessness of the individual man. Each one requires the co-operation of many in any task of construction. No one seems to make an outright discovery even though he may appear to do so. He may make something work which the line before him had not succeeded in doing, and for this he is hailed as the inventor. But all he really did was to put on the topmost brick or fit the missing screw.

When one surveys the final product, if indeed there is a finality in it, one can usually see clearly how that result has been inevitable from the very first; that it was part of the plan of God, and that from the beginning of Creation all that progressive invention was intended to be at the service of man in general. It is no happy accident but part of the method of God that human brains develop them.

A master-mind, which was not that of man, had originally conceived that goal and had disclosed it to that

long line of seekers little by little, item by item, link by link. To each one had been revealed a note of inspiration or a section of a law. In all that chain of discovery so ingeniously and laboriously pieced together there was not a thing which could be called a creation. It was all a matter of finding and mixing and forming.

But man cannot be made to see all that. He has convinced himself that he is a sort of creator even though he has no idea how all that substance of the universe came into existence, nor how its complete but consistent and harmonious system of laws was born. He takes that for granted as if it were a minor matter, and on it – as on a foundation – he proceeds with his own little bit of building up as if it were of the same classification as the original Creation, as if he were a new Creator taking over from one who had retired from the business!

Of course the disproportion of that way of thinking is colossal. It is a little like as if a spider having built its web in the corner of a room, believes itself to have constructed the whole house. The tragedy of it is that man, having exaggerated himself to that central position, is incapable of receiving the simple Christian story.

And here, I think, we are catching a glimpse of what took place ages ago in the fall of the angels. To us it is almost inconceivable that those splendid intelligences, so close to God and so much more capable than we of understanding the infinite gap between them and him, should be found asserting themselves against him as if there were some sort of equality. It is possible for us to behave in that audacious and ridiculous manner because we know so little that we can even tell ourselves that God does not exist. But the angels were closer to him. The picture painted by Holy Writ is that they were very near

to him so that they were able to talk to him face to face. Yet they calmly insisted on their own point of view.

It is into a frame of mind somewhat of that order that scientific man has climbed. He has been allowed by God to play his part in the gradual unfolding of the wonders of the world but he has identified himself so completely with the process that he imagines himself to be the producer instead of merely the projector. With that contorted conception of his role he is making a dangerous approximation to following in the footsteps of Lucifer.

Let us humbly inspect that mysterious situation of the rebel angels and the similar one of our first parents. Why did they act so incomprehensibly? I will venture on an explanation based on our own methods of behaviour. The moment we discover that we have a talent, or as soon as we get power into our hands, we become proud about it. We have achieved greatness. We make ourselves the equals of those who previously seemed to be above us. What we have got from others belongs to us! Everything springs out of our own quality! We have become proud in the theological sense of the word. We are self-sufficient. We are satisfied that if enough authority was given to us we would revolutionise our surroundings.

Arguing from that mental quirk of ours, I would say that it was that same want of balance – admittedly in a graver form because they had greater intelligence and more control of their will than we – that brought down our first parents. They must have been tremendous persons, their bodies and intellects proceeding straight from the hands of God, unsullied by sin, of matchless perfection. They were very close to God and scripture tells us that they conversed with him. He had extraordinary plans for them. We may be sure that they enjoyed remarkable

powers. God lavished things on them. In that set-up we can see a distant likeness to the more privileged ones among ourselves and we can reasonably draw a line from ourselves to Adam and Eve, and we see that they let themselves be borne away, just as we would, by their apparent greatness. They appropriated to themselves the gifts which God had poured out on them and in a minute the cutting edge of a wrongful independence had entered into them. Independence of what? Independence of God. They considered that they were capable of making their own judgements and of holding a different opinion to that of God, and finally of insisting on it.

That, I suggest was the manner in which the trial came to them. They had embarked on the slippery slope of pride and down they slid to the dreadful bottom. And now in turn I reason from them to the rebellious angels. They too are bathed in the radiance of God. Their gifts and their powers far exceeded those of Adam and Eve. They had peerless intellects containing all knowledge. They could move through space with the speed of light. They could do practically what they liked through the power which God had placed at their disposal. Can we not conclude that their fall derived from precisely the same ingredients as those which brought down Adam and Eve?

They really reckoned, in spite of the common sense which formed part of their intellectual endowment, that they had a position of their own; that they could assert themselves against God. They failed to grasp the completeness of their dependence on him, and that incomprehension turned into pride. Their fate was like that of the ship which drags its anchor and goes on to the rocks.

Here let me clarify things. It is not pride to recognise that we have capabilities. It would be a false humility to

affect not to have them if they were there. It is legitimate to take pleasure out of having gifts or at being used by God for important purposes. But this is quite different from pride which is a glorifying in those things as if they were exclusively our own possession, for which we are beholden to nobody and which we may use as we think fit. This is full pride.

It is that posture of independence as against God which constitutes pride. It is as much a folly as if the electrician were to claim to be the author of the light and power which he is only guiding. This offence puts the soul into an incorrect relation with God that he has, for the very sake of that soul, to bring it to its senses in some way, usually by the diminution of what he has been giving to it.

If in the light of the foregoing we read that section of the handbook on humility, which usually comes in for jocular treatment, it will stand out as of primary importance, perhaps as the chief one of all. In a sense it is the foundation stone of the Legion because without a proper humility our work is of no value. It would only be an exercise of self, and the seeking of self is turning away from God.

That first sin of all, Original Sin, was an assertion of self. Our first parents had received the most solemn command that they were to avoid one thing and apparently one thing only. Yet, unbelievable as it may seem, they went off and disobeyed that commandment. Moreover, they did it with a degree of determination and deliberation which does not enter into our transgressions; because they were un-fallen nature and had a perfect control over their passions – which is not the case with us. We are not the authors but the victims of that Original Sin which has

darkened our understanding and weakened our will. Our resistance is feeble and we fall easily before temptation.

That was not the case with them. They had full power to choose. Furthermore, there is a legend which you will find in Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' which describes the fallen angels as learning of God's creation of a new order of beings which would fill the places in Heaven which they had forfeited. The normal sentiment of jealousy is poisonous and causes people to do extreme things. But in those angels it would have been a like a devouring fire; the notion of others taking their places would be unsupportable. They have to do something about it. Milton depicts a council of war being held and the decision being reached that they will somehow thwart this new scheme of God.

Scouts are sent out through space to find the new creation. The book shows a nice appreciation of what space means although it was written more than three hundred years ago. Travelling at the speed of light, those spirits consume long periods in their ransacking of the universe.

Eventually our own little spot of territory comes under notice and our first parents are found. Satan is sent to deal with them. Milton's narrative, and the exquisite illustrations by Gustave Dore which ornament expensive editions of the book, show Satan carrying out a careful reconnaissance, what the detective stories would call 'casing the joint'.

The plan which is determined upon is based on their own experience. They will use against Adam and Eve the same means which had been their own un-doing, that is the sin of pride. If it had been so efficacious in their own case, it could hardly fail against beings whom they regarded as vastly inferior to themselves. So the

plan was that Adam and Eve would be led into pride and disobedience.

Thus far Milton's account follows the traditional one, but at this point he introduces something which is novel. I do not know if it is based on a legend or if it is an embellishment of his own. He shows God as taking cognisance of the plot and sending the Archangel Raphael to Eden to give solemn warning to the menaced pair. One of Dore's pictures shows the conference between the couple and the archangel in scenic surroundings of incomparable splendour.

The idea of this warning, whether it took that shape or not, is good. For it brings out the essential note that if Adam and Eve were in danger of such a special kind, they would somehow or other be placed on their guard against it. It would not be the divine method to leave them exposed like a pair of babes in the wood to the wiles of utterly evil and astute intelligence; for such had become those former angels of light in the second that they divorced themselves from God's grace. It is quite certain that those first humans would be sufficiently forewarned and provided against the trial which they were being permitted to encounter.

The solemnity of that one and only commandment to which they had been subjected would be further stressed. We may be sure that the two listened intently and gave firm promise of their loyalty to God. But in spite of all that, they failed. They committed the grave offence of a brazen, inexcusable disobedience. It was a case of the fall of the angels over again, and for the very same cause. They know best! This was a special case where they felt able to judge better than God! His commandment had not contemplated that particular situation which the Serpent

had put before them! This was something unique! Of course they would argue it out plausibly between them. Really God – because he was God – could not see things from their standpoint. If he did, he would understand and agree!

This sounds ridiculous, but it is precisely the way in which pride reasons. Pride tells us that we know; that we are the best qualified to judge; and that we must insist on our opinion.

That was the Original Sin, and the entire Christian dispensation follows from it. But it is too simple a story for many of the mighty modern minds to accept. If it had been dished up as an obscure psychological process suitably decked out with the current coined words, those minds might condescend to accept it. But as it is, no.

Pride is an independence of God which can go so far as to take up a position of opposition to him and which can cut us off from him – much as rubber would insulate us against electricity.

By reason of our very weakness, it is not so easy for the common run of us to err to that grievous extent. But we can fall into the lesser degree of pride. We can be a little against God. We can claim as our own what he has given us. We can neglect to render due glory to him. Thereby we prevent him from giving to us. We shield ourselves from the sunshine of grace and leave ourselves cold, in darkness, un-provided for.

That is not God's will in regard to us. He wants to give us everything. He will use us for his purposes if we will but let him. But there must exist a compatibility or connection between him and us, for him to act fully in us. That compatibility lies in the recognition by us of our relationship to him, which is one of total dependence. We

are essentially evil. The good which is in us is his gift. If we arrogate that good and its consequences to ourselves, we are only ministering to the pride in us and in that way turning the gift and the grace into a hurt to ourselves; so that in mercy to us God has to withdraw those things. It is not his plan to accomplish something great through us if it is only going to prove a poison to our souls.

So at all costs we must preserve ourselves from the slightest attitude of independence from God. We must see his operation in everything holy that comes to us. That establishes the compatibility which enables us to put forth his power in us.

But there is a further requirement. It is that the Blessed Virgin be permitted to enter in. For it is her particular prerogative to combat pride. As the serpent was the abode and symbol of pride, so was she the embodiment of the contrary virtue. Therefore God's reversal of the serpent's victory began by utilising her. His plan depended on her because she was the only human being in whom pride would have no dominion. God built on her absolutely perfect humility and was able through her to launch the work of Redemption of the whole human race.

In a different form, her role remains the same. Then she was a maid and now she is our mother. She continues to contribute to the total scheme of Redemption that vital element of dependence on God, of compatibility with God, which we call humility. God imparts that element to us through her and not otherwise.

This is part of what St Louis Marie de Montfort entitles the great secret which is unknown to the world. Mary is our mother in a sense infinitely beyond that of earthly maternity. She sees that wilfulness in us and knows only too well that it can strike at our whole spiritual life. It is

her special concern to protect us from it, and this she will do most efficaciously if we give her due place in our lives.

This holds to such an extent that I would imagine that the downward course into the more serious forms of pride always begins, and continues, out of a superior attitude to Mary. That is why one must regard with a real fear the current improper demeanour towards her. Despite the unequivocal statement of her role made by the Vatican, the progressive elements are found depreciating her. The end of that policy is sadly certain. They are giving unrestrained scope to the pride that is abundant in them and it will operate as surely as the law of gravity. They will end by despising the Faith itself.

God began his whole scheme of Redemption by placing it on her as its foundation. He knew that no ray of his grace would be obscured or deflected by her; that she would fully give as she had fully received. That is the primary reason why she could be used to save the world. In its measure the same law applies to us. If we are willing to pass on what we receive without appropriating any of it to ourselves, we will likewise be entrusted with very great graces. Jesus and Mary are anxious to associate us to themselves in their task of spiritualising us and of saving the world, but the imperative stipulation is that we do not appropriate God's glory to ourselves even in the smallest degree.

Therein lies the most compressed formula which I can present for making something of our lives. It cannot fail if used.