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# ATHEISM AND SUICIDE.

A REPLY TO

ALFRED TENNYSON, *Poet Laureate.*

BY

G. W. FOOOTE.

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MR. TENNYSON has written some fine poetry in his old age, and he has also written a good deal of trash. Most of the latter has appeared in the hospitable columns of the *Nineteenth Century*. Mr. James Knowles, the editor of that magazine, is an excellent man of business and knows what takes with the British public. He is fully aware that Mr. Tennyson is the popular poet of the day, and with commendable sagacity, he not only accepts the poet-laureate's verses whenever he can get them, but always prints them in the largest type. Mr. Tennyson opened the first number of his magazine with a weak sonnet, in which men like Professor Clifford were alluded to as seekers of hope "in sunless gulfs of doubt." That little germ has developed into the longer poem on "Despair" that appears in the current number of the *Nineteenth Century*.

The critics have lauded this poem. Nothing else could be expected of them. Mr. Tennyson is the popular poet, the household poet, the Christian poet, and scarcely a critic dares give him aught but unstinted praise. The ordinary gentlemen of the press write to order; they describe Mr. Tennyson's poetry as they describe Mr. Irving's acting; they are fettered by great, and especially by fashionable reputations; and when the public has settled who are its favorites they never resist its verdict but simply flow with the stream. In the course of time there grows up a sanctified cant of criticism. If you are rash enough to doubt the favorite's greatness, you are looked upon as a common-place person incapable of appreciating genius. If you object to the popular poet's intellectual ideas, you are rebuked for not seeing that he is divinely inspired. Yet it is surely indisputable that ideas are large or small, true or false, whether they are expressed in verse or in prose. When poets condescend to argue they must be held amenable to the laws of reason. The right divine of kings to govern wrong is an exploded idea, and the right divine of poets to reason wrong should share the same fate.

Mr. Tennyson's poem is not too intelligible, and with a proper appreciation of this he has told the gist of the story in a kind of "argument."

"A man and his wife having lost faith in a God, and hope of a life to come, and being utterly miserable in this, resolved to end themselves by drowning. The woman is drowned, but the man is rescued by a minister of the sect he had abandoned."

Now Mr. Tennyson has not worked fairly on these lines. The question "Does Atheism, *as such*, incline men to self-destruction?" is not touched. The Atheist husband of "Despair" loses more than belief in God and hope of a life to come. His wife suffers from a malady only curable, if at all, by the surgeon's knife. His eldest son has forged his name and ruined him, while it is hinted that another son has sunk to a still worse depth of vice. And he describes himself as "a life without sun, without health, without hope, without any delight." All this is very inartistic. An Atheist under such a burden of trouble might commit suicide just as a Christian might. Dr. Newman well says that by a judicious selection of facts you may prove anything, and Mr. Tennyson has judiciously selected his facts. He could not kill his hero with Atheism, and so he brings in bad health, a diseased wife, cruel and criminal children, and a ruined home. Any one of these might prompt to suicide, without the introduction of Atheism at all.

Mr. Tennyson's lack of art in this poem goes still farther. He makes the husband and wife drown themselves theatrically. They walk out into the breakers near a lighthouse. This is mere melodrama. Why did they not take poison and die in each other's arms? The only answer is that Mr. Tennyson wanted to use that lighthouse, and as he could not bring the lighthouse to them he took them to the lighthouse. He wished to make the husband think to himself as he looked at its rolling eyes—

"Does it matter how many they saved? We are all of us wreck'd at last."

This is an old trick of Mr. Tennyson's. He is always making his wonderful and vivid perceptions of external nature compensate for his lack of spiritual insight and power.

The melodrama of "Despair" is continued to the end. The wife is successfully drowned as she was not required any further in the poem, but the husband is rescued by (of all men in the world!) the minister of the chapel he had

forsaken. He loaths and despises this preacher, yet he tells him all his domestic secrets and reveals to him all his motives. Nay more, he wastes a great of denunciation on his rescuer, and vehemently protests his intention to do for himself despite his watcher's "lynx-eyes." Why all this pother? Earnest suicides are usually reserved and very rarely make a noise. Why not hold his tongue and quietly seize the first opportunity? But Mr. Tennyson's heroes are generally infirm of purpose. He can make his characters talk, but he cannot make them act.

Another defect of Mr. Tennyson's heroes is their abnormal self-consciousness. The hero of "Maud" rants about himself until we begin to hope that the Crimea will really settle him. The hero of "Locksley Hall" is a selfish cad who poses through every line of faultless eloquence, until at last we suspect that "cousin Amy" has not met the worst fate which could befall her. And the hero of "Despair" is little better. After powerfully describing the walk with his wife to the breaker's edge of foam, he says that they kissed and bade each other eternal farewell. There he should have stopped. But he must go on with—

"Never a cry so desolate, not since the world began!  
Never a kiss so sad, no, not since the coming of man!"

This little speculation could not be verified or disproved. It is one which selfish people usually entertain. They nearly always think their own sorrows the greatest the world ever saw. Fortunately, although it may be news to Mr. Tennyson, all Atheists are not of that kind. Some of them, at least, are capable of the heroic joys of life, and of consuming their personal sorrows in the fire of enthusiasm for lofty and unselfish aims.

Mr. Tennyson should remember the sad end of Brutus in "Julius Cæsar." Perhaps he does, for some of his language seems borrowed from it. Brutus has lost what he most values. His country's liberties, for which he has fought and sacrificed all, are lost, and his noble wife has killed herself in a frenzy of grief. He kills himself too rather than witness the dishonor of Rome and minister to the usurper's pride. But he does not pule and whine. He also bids his dearest left adieu—

"For ever, and for ever, farewell, Cassius!  
If we do meet again, why, we shall smile;  
If not, why then, this parting was well made."

And Cassius replies in the same magnanimous vein. There

is a large and noble spirit which can face even suicide with dignity and without repining.

So infected with selfishness is Mr. Tennyson's Atheist that he doubts the utility of virtue—

“Does it matter so much whether crown'd for a virtue, or hang'd for a crime?”

Yes, it does matter; or why does he cry out against his son's wickedness? If the young man's crime “killed his mother almost,” other people's crime injures mankind, and that is its condemnation. The real Atheist has his moral creed founded on fact instead of fancy, and therefore, when things go wrong with him, he does not rail against virtue. He knows it to be good in the long run to the human family whatever may be his own fate.

The hero of “Despair” had evidently been a Calvinist. He reminds the minister of his having “bawled the dark side of his faith, and a God of eternal rage.” And he exclaims—

“What! I should call on that Infinite Love that has served us so well?

Infinite wickedness rather that made everlasting Hell,  
Made us, foreknew us, foredoom'd us, and does what he will  
with his own;

Better our dead brute mother who never has heard us groan!

Hell? if the souls of men were immortal, as men have been told,

The lecher would cleave to his lusts, and the miser would yearn  
for his gold,

And so there were Hell for ever! but were there a God as you  
say,

His Love would have power over Hell till it utterly vanish'd  
away.”

Now Calvinism is certainly not the creed any man could regret to find untrue. And to our mind a man who could live for years in the belief that the evils of this life are ordained by God, and will be followed by an ordained hell in the next life, is not likely to destroy himself when he finds that the universe has no jailer and that all the evils of this life end with it.

The man and his wife turn from the “dark fatalist creed” to the growing dawn

“When the light of a Sun that was coming would scatter the  
ghosts of the Past,

And the cramping creeds that had madden'd the peoples would  
vanish at last.”

But when the dawn comes, they find that they have "past from a cheerless night to the glare of a drearier day." They are without a real God, for what deity remains is only a cloud of smoke instead of a pillar of fire. Darwinism they find to be very cold comfort, and they wail over themselves as "poor orphans of nothing," which is a comical phrase, and one which we defy Mr. Tennyson or anybody else to explain. If the Poet Laureate thinks that Darwinian Atheists go about bemoaning themselves as poor orphans, he is very much mistaken. He had better study them a little before writing about them again. They are quite content to remain without a celestial father. Earthly parents are enough for them, earthly brothers and sisters, earthly wives, and earthly friends. And most of them deem the grasp of a father's hand, and the loving smile on a mother's face, worth more than all the heavenly parentage they are satisfied to lack.

Mr. Tennyson's husband and wife, being utterly forlorn, resolve to drown themselves, and the husband gives their justification:—

"Why should we bear with an hour of torture, a moment of  
 pain  
 If every man die for ever, if all his griefs are in vain,  
 And the homeless planet at length will be wheel'd thro' the  
 silence of space,  
 Motherless evermore of an ever-vanishing race,  
 When the worm shall have writhed its last, and its last brother-  
 worm will have fled  
 From the dead fossil skull that is left in the rocks of an earth  
 that is dead?"

Now all this will no doubt happen. Many millions of years hence this world will be used-up like the moon; and therefore, according to Mr. Tennyson's argument, we should commit suicide rather than put up with the toothache. It will be all the same in the end. True; but it is a long while to the end. And people who act on Mr. Tennyson's principle must either forget this, or they must resemble the man who refused to eat his dinner unless he had the guarantee of a good dinner for ever and ever, with a dessert by way of Amen.

Elsewhere they express pity for others as well as for themselves—

"Pity for all that aches in the grasp of an idiot power,  
 And pity for our own selves on an earth that bore not a flower;  
 Pity for all that suffers on land or in air, or the deep,  
 And pity for our own selves till we long'd for eternal sleep."

Mr. Tennyson may well make his Atheist husband say "for we leaned to the darker side." This is an earth without a flower! In every sense it is untrue. There are flowers of beauty in the natural world, and flowers of greater beauty in the human garden, despite the weeds. This suicidal pair are fond of what Mr. Tennyson has himself called "the falsehood of extremes."

Sincere pessimists do not advocate suicide. Schopenhauer himself condemns it as a superlative act of egoism. If here and there a pessimist destroys himself, how can that make things better for the masses who are governed by instinct and not by metaphysics? Mr. Tennyson does not see that the most confirmed pessimist may, like George Eliot, believe in *Meliorism*; that is, not in perfection, but in improvement. Nature, we may be sure, will never produce a race of beings with a general taste for suicide; and it is therefore the duty of those who deplore the ineradicable evils of life, to stay with their brethren and to do their share towards improving the common lot. If they cannot really make life happier, they may at least make it less miserable, which is very much the same thing.

Has Mr. Tennyson been reading that grand and powerful poem of Mr. James Thomson's, and is "Despair" the result? If so, it is a poor outcome of such a majestic influence. Mr. Tennyson has misread that great poem. Its author has his joyous as well as his sombre moods, and he has himself indicated that it does not cover the whole truth. Pessimists, too, are not so stupid as to think that the extinction of a few philosophers will affect the general life, or that a universal principle of metaphysics can determine an isolated case. They know also that philosophy will never resist Nature or turn her set course. They see that she is enormously fecund, and is able to spawn forth life enough to outlast all opposition, with enough instinct of self-preservation to defy all the hostility of sages. And it is a noteworthy fact that the chief pessimists of our century have not courted death themselves except in verse. Schopenhauer lived to seventy-two; Hartmann is one of the happiest men in Germany; Leopardi died of disease; and the author of "The City of Dreadful Night" has not yet committed suicide and probably never will. It is one thing to believe that, considered universally, life is a mistake, and quite another thing to cut one's own throat. The utmost that even Schopenhauer suggested in the way of carrying out his principles, was that when the human race had become far

more intellectual and moral, and far less volitional and egoistic, it would cease to propagate itself and so reach *Nirvana*. Whoever expects that to happen has a very far-reaching faith. If the sky falls we shall of course catch larks, but when will it fall?

Atheists, however, are not necessarily pessimists, and in fact few of them are so. Most of them believe that a large portion of the world's evil is removable, being merely the result of ignorance and superstition. Mr. Tennyson might have seen from Shelley's writings that an Atheist may cherish the noblest hopes of progress. Perhaps he would reply that Shelley was not an Atheist, but few will agree with him who have read the original editions of that glorious poet and the very emphatic statements of his friend Trelawny.

Does Atheism prompt men to suicide? That is the question. Mr. Tennyson appears to think that if it does not it should. We cannot, however, argue against a mere dictum. The question is one of fact, and the best way to answer it is to appeal to statistics. Atheists do not seem prone to suicide. So far as we know no prominent Atheist has taken his own life during the whole of this century. But let us go farther. There has recently been published an erudite work\* on "Suicide, Ancient and Modern," by A. Legoyt, of Paris. He has given official tables of the reasons assigned for suicides in most of the countries of Europe; and although religious mania is among these causes, Atheism is not. This dreadful incitement to self destruction has not yet found its way into the official statistics even of Germany or of France, where Atheist abound!

Suicides have largely increased during the last twenty years. In England, for instance, while from 1865 to 1876 the population increased 14.6 per cent., suicides increased 27.1 per cent. In France, Prussia, Austria, Russia, Switzerland and Belgium the increase is still more alarming. But during the same period *lunacy* has wonderfully increased; and the truth is that both are caused by the ever-increasing velocity and complexity of modern life, which makes greater demands on our cerebral power than we are able to answer. By-and-bye this will rectify itself through

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\* *Le Suicide, Ancien et Moderne*. Etude Historique, Philosophique Morale et Statistique. Par A. LEGOYT. Paris: A. Drouin.

natural selection, but for the present our brains are not strong enough for their sudden access of work. Hence the increase of nervous derangement, lunacy, and suicide.

But it may be urged that religion keeps down the number of suicides which would be still more plentiful without it. That, however, is a mere matter of opinion, which can hardly be verified or disproved. Religion does not restrain those who *do* commit suicide, and that fact outweighs all the fine talk about its virtue in other cases.

Some Christian apologists have made much capital out of George Jacob Holyoake's meditation on suicide in Gloucester jail, when he was imprisoned for "blasphemy," or in other words, for having opinions of his own on the subject of religion. Mr. Holyoake's mental torture was great. His wife was in want, and his favorite daughter died while he was in prison. Fearing that his reason might forsake him, and being resolved that the Christian bigotry which had made him suffer should never reduce him to an object of its derision, he prepared the means of ending his life if the worst should happen. "See," say these charitable Christians, "what a feeble support Atheism is in the hour of need! Nothing but belief in Christ can enable us to bear the troubles of life." But our answer is that Mr. Holyoake did *not* commit suicide after all; while, on the other hand, if we may judge by our own notes during the past six months, one *parson* cuts his throat, or hangs, or drowns, or poisons himself, on an average every month.

Recurring finally to Mr. Tennyson, we say that his poem is a failure. He does not understand Atheism, and he fails to appreciate either its meaning or its hope. We trust that he will afflict us with no more poetical abortions like this, but give us only the proper fruit of his genius, and leave the task of holding up Atheists as a frightful example to the small fry of the pulpit and the religious press.

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PRICE ONE PENNY.