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INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE.

A DISCOURSE

BY

MONCURE D. CONWAY.

PRICE TWOPENCE.

South Place Chapel.

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INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE.

FINSBURY, *June 27th*, 1875.

A GREAT Italian actor has for some time been bringing before our community a vivid representation of as sad a tragedy as ever haunted even the imagination of Shakespeare. The drama of Othello may remind us of the demon of ancient fable, which at first is a tiny worm, but gradually swells to an enormous serpent, binding a giant in its coils. It is the picture of a noble man,—brave, generous, loving, simple. We see the first entrance of a faint suspicion into his mind, through the device of one who has found his vulnerable point; we observe its growth to jealousy; we see it worming its way upward, coiling around reason, eating into the heart of love, till at last the hero is laid low, with life, love, hope, fallen into ruin with him.

That is the tragedy of a very familiar plane of our nature—a border-region in us, where animal

and moral instincts have their interplay, manifested in palpable results. But there are tragedies that belong altogether to the invisible realm within us, whose desolations make no such impression on the senses. There is a man greater than the bravest warrior. It was of that nobler being that Shakespeare thought when he exclaimed, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!" The pure reason of man is that high and costly product which all the ages were appointed to bear; 'tis that consummate flower of the world which reduces all other things to mere leaves on its stem,—passions, affections, actions, worthy as they are tributary to its perfection. Who, then, can measure the tragedy when some small intellectual cowardice, some little compliance with falsehood, some apparently slight error admitted through a crevice in the judgment, swelling as it climbs, coils round the will, mounts to the throne of reason, and degrades to a bondslave of superstition, sect or party, the eye and front that gave assurance of a man!

Throughout the earth the gospel preached by nature to man is that of growth. This is the glorious marvel that is ever with us. Seed-grain climbing

to waving harvest, acorn springing up to towering oak; black coal crystallising to diamond, and flint gathering the heat of the earth till as opal it meets the dawn with tints pure as its own. On every lowliest grass blade and leaf is written the story of Ascension. And how great does that theme become when it is seen in the growth of weak infancy to heroic manhood! Behold the helpless babe become 'a palace of sweet sounds and sights,' or culminating in the brain of Plato, of Shakespeare, foreheads mated with the dome of Heaven. Or see small barbarous colonies of rude men forming religions, laws, arts—creating civilisations. All this natural history and human history is the preface to each individual existence, assigns its present task, and surrounds it with the means and methods of accomplishment. We have arrived at a period when the secret which nature has been so long striving to communicate to her human child has at last been caught. It is, that what is mere renewal in the earth must in man be improvement; that which in lower nature is mere routine—seed, and blossom and fruit, and back to seed again—must rise by reason to be progress that never returns on its track. It must be seed and blossom, and fruit, and then a permanently better fruit. Art appears—the pictorial alphabet of natural forms and forces

combined by reason and taste to convey ideas. Art appears ; and briars climb to roses, wild gourds to melons, bitter almonds to peaches—things which nature never produced, only through ages suggested until at last intelligence took the hint. But now again—how slowly do we learn the secret which all this outward culture is trying to tell us, the secret of the mighty forces of inward culture ! The average man is swiftly borne by a power realising the fabled carpet, which transported its possessor through the air at his will : that power of steam for ages slept unknown in fire and water ; but does it occur to the wayfarer that nobler powers may be sleeping in his own mind ? Does it occur to the man and woman admiring the artificial triumphs of the horticultural show, that if the inner world of mind and heart were suddenly to become visible and made into a show it might appear as a jungle of superstitions, a swamp of rank weeds of prejudice and passion, with only here and there a stately growth cultured by science ?

Every human intellect is a splendid possibility. It has a natural history ; it is endowed with potential seeds that have a normal growth through which they will certainly run. But what does that natural normal growth amount to ? It is only an increase of size and strength. You may say just

the same of a gourd. The seed of it will grow, it will creep along in the mud, it will spread, and end in a bag of seeds worthless as itself. That sweet fruit hid in each seed will remain for ever hid unless art brings it out. That high product, hid in each mind, will equally remain hid unless art brings it into existence. You cannot get the best of any mind without education. And this does not supersede nor change a single law of the thing cultivated, be it a flower or a mind; it is indeed effected by the closest obedience to, and co-operation with, the laws of that thing; it brings all that is known of those laws generally to bear upon the individual seed or mind specifically, as the accumulated science of a thousand years may enter a room to save one child's life.

Now, the discovery that each mind represents the possibility of a new variety of fruit, at once raises our definition of intellect. We find that the mass of minds go on reproducing the fatal averages of opinion and belief: their creeds and customs are hereditary; when they speak, you listen to their great grandfather, as he listened to his, and so on all the way back to some ancient Pope or Bishop, historically dead, but really immortal as mental impenetrability. We must define intellect as that which emerges out of this conventional mass; not

indeed unrelated to it, but carrying its slumbering powers to conscious realisation and effective action through individual thought and will. Intellect must become individual that it may be universal: that is, each real mind must have had its own history, exercised its actual faculties, and fought its own obstacles all the way up to conscious unity with great principles, which work on the unthinking mass only, as it were, chemically.

And if, with this long genealogy, there is produced at last a mind that really inquires and thinks, holding for all a promise of real addition to their higher nature, how bitter is the disappointment when that new power is turned to ends that debase and corrupt it! Ordinarily, indeed, this sad result comes of the merest moral weakness. Intellect is a marketable commodity, and unhappily it brings most when put up at auction: still more unfortunately, error is able to bid higher than truth. All around us we hear the outcries of fine intellects sold to that miserable servitude—not always by themselves either, but by the cruel kindness of friends in the days of their immaturity. Were there ever words more pathetic than those of the Dean of highest position in England. A great newspaper asked, Why can not he be contented with Westminster Abbey, without trying to mingle with

dissenters? Alas, sighs the great clergyman, how can I be contented with Westminster Abbey while it cuts me off from fellowship with so many noble souls in all ages? Fetters are not less galling because golden, nor even because they are historical. But wherever such groans are heard there is life: wherever men are struggling with their chains, they may be broken: the shadow of intellectual death is there where scholars have suffocated doubt, denied their ideals, whom no cockcrow can now awaken to their treason against Truth.

But besides this familiar form of mental extinction through moral failure, there have arisen in these last days certain temptations of a different kind which threaten arrest of intellectual development. Some minds seem to grow finely to a certain stage, and then become weary of growth. Their powers from growing upward turn downward like branches of the weeping ash. They seem to give up all they have won for the sake of rest, or impatience of everything tentative and provisional. Having too much character to relapse into worn out creeds, they try to find it in some hard and fast system of more modern invention, but equally fatal to evolution of thought. A dogma need not be ancient in order to be destructive of intellectual freedom. It is the dogmatic spirit which is injurious; and by that I

mean the holding on to an opinion without submitting it to the test of universal reason, without recognising facts that may be urged against it, or for its modification. Every mind must form opinions, but each opinion so gained is for a healthy mind held only as a vantage point for farther attainment. Nor will such a mind maintain its opinions less earnestly than the dogmatist : for it knows well that so far as any opinion is true it will still live in each new and further truth. Each opinion is held as a seed to be sown that it may be quickened to its more spiritual body. But dogma means the petrification of opinion ; to commit one's mind to stand by any incidental form of thought in hostility to the thinking power itself, is burial, not in fruitful earth, but mummied imprisonment. I call it intellectual suicide. For thought is mental motion. A poet has said—

The firefly only shines when on the wing :
So is it with the mind ; when once we rest,
We darken.

To put an end to intellectual movement is to bring the intellectual life itself to its term ; and that is done whenever a mind yields itself to any theory or system which claims to have reached final truth and so bars the door against farther inquiry.

Now, this suicidal tendency has appeared in some quarters where it might least have been expected. We even see cropping up a sort of dogmatic atheism.

The term 'Atheism' was originally hurled as an epithet by superstitious people against certain honest minds who refused to bow down to deities demonstrably fictitious. Such minds said, "Very well ; if not to believe in your jealous, wrathful, unjust god or your anthropomorphic creator, make us atheists, have it your own way." But that brave and critical attitude towards religious fictions did by no means raise the particular denials into a dogmatic position, such as atheism, if adopted as a philosophy, assumes. Does any one know enough about this universe to lay it down as a hard and fast principle that there is no god ? He may say that the facts prove the non-existence of such a being as Jehovah, or Allah, or the Trinity of India, Egypt or Christendom ; but only a being who has scaled all the heights and fathomed the depths of this universe, can assume to set limits to inquiry by affirming the non-existence of deity as an everlasting principle. It is perfectly true that so long as every question was answered by the word "god," scientific inquiry was impossible ; but it is equally true that to conduct every inquiry on the assumption that there cannot be any god is to foreclose a legitimate direction of thought. Nor is it philosophical to build a positive theory on a basis of mere negation ; it is the poorest outcome of discussion to take for my creed that somebody else's is

false. It is often necessary to show that an existing creed is not true ; but that does not exonerate any from trying to ascertain what is true ; nor can any healthy mind be content that inquiry shall end either in the bog of bigotry on the one hand, or on the other in the empty abyss of negation.

If it be thought a vain apprehension that free-thinking is in danger of impawning both freedom and thought by raising Atheism into a dogma, let those who think so observe what has come of its partial organisation in Comtism or Positivism. Some of the finest minds gave themselves up to that system, which invested a series of negations with the importance of affirmations, and expressed them through forms that had grown around discredited creeds. It was rightly called Catholicism without a god. True, the Positivist Church instituted the worship of Humanity as a divine entity ; but such deification of Humanity was based upon the negative dogma, by repudiation of the sceptical method. Do not misunderstand me as sharing the orthodox objections to their position. In every respect they are superior to their conventional censors. I have not the least idea that they are grieving or insulting any being in this universe. Nor are the Atheists and the Comtists among intellectual suicides. I do believe, however, that they have cut some of their intellectual sinews. They

have seriously diminished their power in the community by assuming that to be settled which is not settled, and foreclosing a true path of inquiry marked out by the aspiration of all ages.

But there are some other modern systems which appear to me fatal. There are minds which are committing themselves to the delusion that the work of intelligence is ended; the problems all solved; God, heaven, hell, immortality, matter, spirit, all at the finger-ends of any one who chooses to read Swedenborg or visit some pretended séance of ghosts. It is most painful to witness how many fine minds have through years built up their edifice of culture only to lay it in ruins under the insanity which fell on that Swedish thinker, or still worse, under the subtle art that now plays upon the weaknesses of fine natures, and poisons minds with superstition through their tender longings for the loved and lost. If the visions of Swedenborg and the spirit-mediums who ape him be true, then there is no use for either inquiry or intellect any more. All science is an impertinence, and it would be better that all libraries were burnt to-morrow. The vulgarest spirit-medium knows more than all the sages, thinkers, philosophers, and scientific men that have lived or now live—more than all of them put together have ever attained. The collective intelligence of

Germany, France, England, America is superseded, and all their knowledge abolished completely—nay, all the laws of thought abolished—so soon as we agree that the secrets of an invisible universe are made known to sheer ignorance without research, without intellectual effort, and in utter defiance of all verifiable knowledge.*

Whether the great problems stated in the very constitution of the human mind, and by which that mind must grow, be dogmatically solved by authority or dogmatically ignored, or settled by the solutions of insanity or of ignorance, in either case it is the end of investigation and growth, the grave of the intellect. That which a man seeth why doth he yet seek for? Man can, indeed, humanly find truth; but what these familiars of the universe claim is the truth that is ultimate. The mind of man can distinguish truth and falsity by no surer test than the invitation they offer it; error never points the mind beyond itself, but every truth buds at the moment it is attained to a larger truth; each truth, like the fabled rod, blossoms in the hand of its right master—the aspiring reason of man.

* Since this was written tidings have come that another fine intellect has fallen into madness through Spiritism,—that of Robert Dale Owen.

It is melancholy enough when infirmity brings on the decline of intellectual power, and man feels the shadow of the night in which he can no longer work. It is related of the sculptor Canova that when he had just finished his figure of Christ, a friend entering found him in tears. "Alas!" said the sculptor, "I have for the first time produced a work with which I am satisfied." The premonition of Canova was true; he never produced another important work; he had recognised the sure sign of decay when above his completed work no higher ideal hovered with larger promise. But the fatal sign is none the less certain where any mind reaches that kind of certainty on great subjects which sees no space beyond, no room for doubt, and feels no desire for a larger view. This, too, may come in due time, when man's best is done, and the hands may be fitly folded on the breast. But it is tragical when a mind that should be growing rushes rashly on that fate. I suppose it was shuddering at this the German wrote:—"If God held absolute truth in his right hand and pursuit of truth in his left, and offered me the choice of either, I would say, 'Truth is for thee alone; for me, I cannot live but by the endless pursuit of Truth.'"

It is even so. Absolute truth is not for man. I know we all sometimes long for it. We are envi-

roned by doubts that sometimes reach very far; there are veils that hang between the heart and that destiny of its own love it longs to read. Little wonder, perhaps, if craving ease for its pain, repose from its weary search, it should consent to take the opiate of superstition. But that is no true repose or ease. The true satisfaction is to school heart and mind into harmony with their law, and the perpetual increase of attainment. Amid all the fluctuations of thought, the floating of things worn out, the streaming on of the tide of knowledge, we must make up our minds to find a repose in activity, like that of the lone albatross above the seas, which sleeps on the wing. We must find repose in the inward peace of a soul fitted to its sphere. And when at last life faints, and nature fails, the truth you have earnestly pursued through life will be the one soft and sweet support on which you may pillow your head for eternity.