

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE BRAIN

AND

THE SOUL.

BY

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WAS JESUS AN IMPOSTOR?—DISCUSSION WITH MRS. WILKIE ..	1 6
SOCRATES, BUDDHA, AND JESUS	0 1
THE MIRROR OF FREETHOUGHT	1 0
THE BIBLE GOD AND HIS FAVOURITES	0 1
FICTITIOUS GODS	0 1
CHRISTIANITY UNWORTHY OF GOD	0 1
THE SECULAR FAITH	0 1
IS RELIGION NECESSARY OR USEFUL?	0 2
HEALTH, WEALTH, AND HAPPINESS	0 1
THE OLD FAITH AND THE NEW	0 1

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THE BRAIN AND THE SOUL.

WHAT is the soul? is a question that has been asked for thousands of years, and those who have been credited with a full and perfect knowledge of the matter have been unable, up to the present, to give a satisfactory answer to the oft-repeated interrogation. Not only can theologians not tell us what the soul is, but they are equally doubtful as to where it is located. A few years ago, in the little parish of Horsleydown, two men met at a small public-house. They talked pleasantly on a variety of subjects, and at length the problem of the existence of an immortal essence in man was brought on the *tapis*. One of them declared his belief that the soul of man was to be found in his head—in fact, he was not quite sure that the intelligence of man was not in reality his soul. The other said that he was convinced that the soul was located somewhere in the stomach; and so the discussion proceeded. But it had not proceeded far when one of the disputants, who had warmed himself to the subject by a plentiful doze of alcoholic drink, took up the pewter pot out of which he had been drinking and struck his antagonist a heavy blow on the head with it, felling him to the ground. It was a terrible blow, splitting the poor fellow's head in two; the blood flowed freely, and in a few moments the man was dead. But the questions as to what the soul is and where it is located were, I need not say, not finally settled by this brutal experiment.

And so it is necessary again to ask, What is the soul? Is it spirit? If so, what is that? With sublime ingenuousness, a short time ago a theologian answered that "spirit is an unknown substance." But, if it is an "unknown substance," how are we to know that it is a substance at all? And, if spirit is a substance, whether known or unknown, is it in the possession of every child born into the world, at the time of birth, or at what period

of the development in the foetus does it make its first appearance? Or are there innumerable souls in the universe waiting to enter the body of each child born into the world? These puzzling questions have been put to the believers in the existence of the immortal element in man times out of mind, and, though a variety of replies have been vouchsafed, they have of necessity been of a very contradictory and unsatisfactory character.

In the present age, when men are seeking rational explanations of natural phenomena, it may not be altogether uninteresting to glance at the views Materialists have taken, and now take, of this question, which is one of absorbing interest to every earnest seeker after truth. In recent years nothing has been made more plain than that, whatever theologians may think the soul to be in itself, they have uniformly admitted that it is very closely associated with the mind of man. Herein they have shown that they have been powerless to resist the stream of tendency along which so many are drifting towards Rationalism. Many scientists as well as theologians of the past were of opinion that the soul was in the body. Professor Büchner, in his "Force and Matter," tells us that the philosopher Fischer thought that the soul was "immanent in the whole nervous system;" and Professor Erdmann, of Halle, held that the theory that the seat of the soul was in the brain was quite erroneous. Now, the whole question must be determined by the weight of evidence, and, while there are absolutely no facts at all to lead us to the belief that the soul is an entity located somewhere in the stomach, the evidence in support of the opposite theory is simply overwhelming. "No fact in our constitution," says Professor Bain, "can be considered more certain than this, that the brain is the chief organ of the mind, and has mind for its principal function." By the word mind is expressed the totality of mental phenomena. Without brain we can have no thought, no intelligence, no mind. And the power of a man's mind is dependent almost entirely upon the size, quality, and constitution of the brain. With large brain of good quality you have mental power and vigorous intelligence. Men's brains are, on an average, larger than women's, and women's larger than those of children. The average weight of a male European brain is $49\frac{1}{2}$ ounces; that of a female 44 ounces.

But though, as a general rule, the larger the brain the greater the mental power, it sometimes happens that an average-sized brain is capable of displaying more intelligence than an abnormally large one. The quality of brain has much to do with this, for not only does it seem necessary that the brain should be large, but that the convolutions in it should be complex and deep with sulci between them, before any extraordinary power is shown. Dr. Carpenter says that almost all men who have manifested great talent have possessed large brains, and he instances Newton, Cuvier, and Napoleon; but it is a fact that some men of genius have had only average-sized brains, though the quality and convolutions of them were doubtless the cause of the splendid talent. The late M. Gambetta might be quoted as an example.

That there is a distinct relation between the size of brain and thought-ability may be seen from the fact that the races lowest down in the scale of civilisation have been shown to possess the smallest brain. The European brain is larger than that of the Hindoo, the North American Indian, or the Chinese. The sane man's brain is considerably larger than that of the idiot. Some idiots' brains have not weighed more than 10 ounces, others reach 19 to 22 ounces, and the largest among them do not exceed 25 ounces. Insanity, as distinguished from idiocy, is caused, there is very little reason to doubt, through disease of the brain, or from nervous derangement. Now, if intelligence depends upon the size and quality of the brain, the soul of man is injured in proportion as these qualities are deficient. In a healthy, active, well-developed brain you have an active, vigorous, and wonder-producing instrument; but in a small, weakly, diseased brain you have manifestations which indicate either the total loss of intelligence or a very partial possession of it.

Now, if the characteristics of the brain, taken collectively, are the soul, the question very naturally arises, Have idiots souls? And, if they have, will they live again? And, if they live again, will they be the same persons as they were in this world? If so, they will be idiots; and, if they are not idiots, they will not be the same persons; and, if they are not the same persons, it will not be they who are living again, but somebody else. Assuming that the mind of man

is the soul, there is absolutely no evidence whatever to lead us to the opinion that it is immortal, except in the sense that, as matter and force are alike imperishable, the elements of which the brain is composed exist through all eternity, in some form or other, in the universe.

Taking the facts as they stand, we find that the brain of the child is altogether inferior in vigour to that of the man, and that with the growth of the body we have a corresponding growth of brain. Not only so, but it is also true that in the brain substance of the child there is more water and less cerebral fat than in that of the adult. It follows, therefore, that, if the soul be identified with the phenomena of mind, it is subject to change; that it grows with the growth of the material organisation; that it becomes strong and active as the individual advances towards maturity, and suffers a gradual diminution of power in old age.

Between the ages of twenty-five and fifty the brain reaches its maximum weight and power, and afterwards slowly diminishes, until we find the individual has lapsed into a second childhood, "sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything." In illness, too, the soul's power of manifesting itself is considerably diminished. Under some diseases there has been an entire loss of intelligence; and often, when the patient has been restored to health, the previous intellectual activity has been, in a large measure, wanting. A sailor who met with an accident, which caused a piece of bone to lodge on the brain, lay in a state of unconsciousness for a whole year till the bone was removed: he then recovered his normal mental state. Now, if the mind is the soul, can disease affect it? Can illness deprive an immortal quality of its power? Can an injury to the brain cause its activity to cease? If it can, how can it be contended that the soul can exist apart from the body, and act independently of it, when we have seen that its power to manifest itself depends upon the healthful condition of the body, and that a piece of bone protruding on to the brain will cause its manifestations to entirely cease? Does this piece of bone really paralyse the "immortal soul"?

Some contend that the human body is merely an instrument upon which the soul performs; that, though the brain appears to be the organ of thought, just as the stomach is the organ of digestion, the lungs of respiration, and the

kidneys of secretion, it is really the animistic principle which thinks ; and that there are good grounds for supposing that the essential part of man does think when the body has ceased to perform its functions. Hence, the brain has been likened to a piano, upon which the mind performs. To test the value of this analogy, we have only to ask what is meant by an organ or instrument but that which produces certain results, without which they could not be performed? A knife, for example, is an instrument that cuts. An organ is only an organ by virtue of producing certain results. The stomach is the organ of digestion because, by means of its operations, food is digested ; the lungs are the organs of respiration because they respire ; the kidneys are the organs of secretion because they secrete ; and the brain is the organ of thought because the result of its workings produces thought.

It is a fact generally known, but not often reflected upon, that for every movement of the body or brain there follows a loss of substance, which must be replaced ; and as neither the working of the nervous system, nor the muscles, nor the brain produce anything, the organism, to repair the waste that is continually going on within, requires nourishment from without, and this is only to be obtained by the means of food.

One-fifth of the blood in the human body is constantly traversing the brain, and in accordance with the speed with which it flows are the effects which follow. For the brain to continue in a healthy condition it is necessary that the individual shall eat good food, and that the flow of blood shall be perfectly regular. A too rapid flow may be caused by the excessive use of alcoholic liquor ; and atmosphere strongly charged with carbonic acid gas will cause a decrease in the rate of the flow, and produce a fainting sensation.

It has been clearly shown that the primary cause of idiocy is a deficiency either in the size or quality of the brain ; and in all cases examined by eminent physiologists this unfortunate falling off has been completely demonstrated. Insanity, on the other hand, results, as many eminent specialists have shown, from a derangement of the nervous system. Many men who have given splendid evidence of the possession of great intellectual power—who have, indeed, achieved con-

siderable success in the world of literature, science, and art—have, unhappily, become insane. In such cases there was, apparently, no deficiency in size, quality, or power of the brain, but a complete derangement of the nervous system. The effect produced by insanity is the total perversion of the moral faculties.

“It is,” observes Louis Büchner, in “Force and Matter,” “through the nervous system radiating from the brain, and which may be considered as presiding over all organic functions, that the brain sways the whole mass of the organism, and reflects again to various parts external impressions, whether of a material or spiritual nature.” A nervous man turns pale with fright; his brain loses its equilibrium when he is under cross-examination, and he flounders about in hopeless bewilderment: if, however, he is encouraged and spoken to kindly, his eyes sparkle, and his face is suffused with a pleasant smile; but, if his anger is excited, his cheeks colour, his lips are compressed, and a frown disfigures his countenance. Now, if the mind works through the brain employing it as an instrument, is it not strange that a derangement of the nervous system should cause the mind to behave in such an extraordinary fashion as to convert an honest man into a thief, a veracious man into a deceiver, or a nervous man into a fool? If the mind is an entity, its quality ought not to be altered by any physical weakness of the organism. Nor should any lack of mental power in the individual interfere or retard the action of the mind. If the body is only an instrument upon which the mind operates, it could perform its work just as well without the instrument as with it; or, if it cannot, what reasonable grounds have we to suppose that it can exist without the body? And, if it can perform its functions only through the medium of an organ or instrument, that would lead us to suppose that, if the mind or soul is immortal, the body must be immortal also, or else the soul, having no instrument upon which to perform through all eternity, would remain after the death of the body in endless inactivity.

It has been contended that, if the brain is the instrument of thought, it ought to continue to perform its work when the head is separated from the body. But I have shown that this faculty is kept at work by the regular supply of

blood, and that when this supply is diminished the operations are interfered with, and, if the supply is stopped, the operations cease altogether. Still, Dr. Büchner has shown that manifestations of the working of the brain may be produced even after death. He says ("Matter and Force"): "On decapitating an animal, say a dog or a rabbit, the severed head gradually loses its excitability; the eyelids are closed, the eyes rigid, the nostrils immovable. Now, if at that moment blood of a bright red, and deprived of its fibrous matter, be injected into the arteries of the brain, the previously lifeless head is re-animated; the eyelids open, the nostrils expand, warmth and sensibility return, the eyes revive, look at the bystanders, and move in their sockets. If the animal be called by its name, the eyes turn in the direction whence the sound came. These signs of returning life last as long as the injection is continued, and vanish and re-appear as the operation is suspended or recommenced. These experiments have not yet been tried on human heads severed from their bodies; but we may safely assume that the same results would follow. M. Brown Séquard, to whom especially we are indebted for these investigations, made the attempt on a human arm recently cut off, though already cold and insensible. In a few moments warmth, sensibility, contraction of the muscles—in fact, all the normal activities returned, and M. Brown Séquard was enabled to repeat the experiment with the same success, until sheer fatigue compelled him to desist."

"The blood is the life" is a conventional phrase, which appears to carry with it a great deal more of truth than most persons imagine. The brain cannot perform its office normally without a copious supply of it, in all its richness and purity.

On the assumption that the soul of man is associated indissolubly with the mind or intelligence, it is extremely difficult to understand upon what rational grounds animals are to be excluded from living again when their organs have ceased to work and their bodies are converted into dust. Even theologians are prepared to admit that many of the lower animals are exceedingly intelligent; but, when it is claimed for them that many of their actions give indication of sound reasoning previous to the performance of them, they dissent, and assert, in opposition, that animals' actions

are instinctive, and that man, in the whole realm of organised being, is the only animal who is moved to the performance of an action as the result of the exercise of reason.

The most eminent authorities in physiology seem now of opinion that the difference between the mind of man and that of animals is not one of kind, but merely of degree; that the intelligence of the animal reveals itself after precisely the same fashion as that of man. According to Carl Vogt, there is not one intellectual faculty which belongs exclusively to man; and though man is, on the whole, much more intelligent than the animal, the difference is distinctly relative, and is brought about by greater intensity and a proper combination of his faculties. All scientific opinion upon this point points in one direction. In his "Descent of Man" (p. 65) Darwin says: "If no organic being, excepting man, had possessed any mental power, or if his powers had been of a wholly different nature from those of the lower animals, then we should never have been able to convince ourselves that our high faculties had been gradually developed. But it can be shown that there is no fundamental difference of this kind. We must also admit that there is a much wider interval in mental power between one of the lowest fishes, as the lamprey or lancelet, and one of the higher apes, than between an ape and man; yet this interval is filled up by numberless gradations." Louis Büchner says: "Neither in form or chemically can any essential difference be proved between the animal and the human brain; the differences are great, but only in degree." Professors Huxley, Carpenter, Bain, and Haeckel also support this view.

In using the word instinct, theologians have mistaken altogether its real meaning; for it does not imply, at all events in its scientific sense, that an animal does an act from a blind, unreasoning impulse, an infallible power implanted within it by a beneficent deity at its creation, but it rather means that an animal, after having performed a certain class of action through successive generations, comes to perform such actions automatically or instinctively, as the result of repeated comparisons and conclusions. For instance, a monkey will instinctively drink spirituous liquors when offered to him; but, if he gets drunk, and, as a necessary result, suffers from headache on the following morning, he is wise enough to abstain from such drink ever after (see Darwin's "Descent

of Man"). This looks very much as though the monkey were a better reasoner than many men.

Most old animals are far more sagacious and prudent than young ones; yet, if animals acted instinctively, and not on account of the exercise of their intelligence, there ought to be no apparent difference. I have watched a cat for more than an hour peeping just round the side of a huge hole into which it had seen a rat seek refuge. Now, this feline creature waited patiently round the corner, just as a school boy does who wants to catch his playmate, until the grand opportunity came for pouncing upon its prey. Other cats had been put to the same hole, yet their instinct did not prompt them to act in the self-same fashion. On the theory that Deity has implanted in animals an unerring instinct in lieu of endowing them with reason, all animals, under similar circumstances, should be prompted to act in precisely the same way. But this is not found to be so.

In the Zoological Gardens I have often watched the monkeys in their exceedingly interesting performances. Once I remember that I gave a young monkey some bread and meat, the meat having a thick coating of mustard. The animal took the morsel and tore it into fragments, then smelt a piece several times, and at last put it in his mouth. For a few seconds the mustard did not take effect; but presently the monkey spat the whole of it out, and rubbed his tongue furiously. Several hours later in the day I presented some bread and meat to the same animal, but he graciously refused to accept it. Was this reason or instinct? Is it from instinct that dogs go to butcher shops and steal meat when the master is not looking, or that foxes rob the roost when the farmer is engaged elsewhere? I remember a dog that went to a particular butcher's shop every week and stole loose scraps of meat from the board. One day, when the dog made his appearance, the butcher was waiting to give him a warm reception, and, when the animal had rescued a large chop from the board, the butcher gave him another, on the tail, which the poor beast is likely to remember to the end of his days. Is it from instinct that this dog has not visited that shop again? Is it from instinct that elephants and bears open their mouths for stray missiles of food, and that the splendidly-trained horses of Messrs. Sanger go through their performances with as much apparent enjoyment as the men

and women who ride them? If animals are not intelligent, and do not reason, how is that they are capable of being taught anything? How is it that a monkey can be taught to beat a drum or fire off a rifle? How is it that dogs are trained to go through acrobatic performances, jump through hoops, etc., with almost as much skill as men. Then take birds. How marvellously intelligent are some of these! The sparrow is never afraid of a man who does not carry a gun. If you try and catch the young of the partridge, the old bird will fly by your side and almost throw itself into your clutches in order to induce you to pursue it in preference to the young ones. By way of revenge, many a swallow has been known to wall up the flyhole of its nest on finding it occupied, on its return in spring, by a sparrow. Was it by instinct that the swallow acted thus?

Man, it is admitted, deliberates before he performs an act. He remembers the effect of past conduct; sees that similar actions produce like results upon his fellows, and thus is enabled to judge as to how he should act in the future. But it should always be remembered that, even in reference to man, most of his actions are performed automatically, without reasoning on each occasion as to why he should do them. For example, when a man rises in the morning he does not say to himself: "Well, I must go to work to-day, and, in order for me to do so, I must dress myself, have my breakfast, and walk to the station, and go by rail to town." Automatically he rises, gets himself prepared, and starts for business, and it very often occurs that a man who is accustomed to go by one route goes in that direction, even though he meant to go in another (see Dr. Carpenter on "Unconscious Cerebrum"). But the point I am concerned to put now is that, if a man is to live again because he has intelligence, or, as the theologian prefers to call it, mind, I see no valid reason why animals should not live again, inasmuch as there is overwhelming proof that they also have intelligence, which, though it is not so fully developed as in man, nevertheless exists, and is susceptible of very great improvement by contact with higher forms of life.

Turning for a moment from the arguments of the theologian, we are at once confronted by the Spiritualist, who commands us to examine the evidence as to the existence of the "modern ghost."

When Hamlet beheld the ghost of his dead father he was not much surprised, because "walking ghosts," clad in full attire, were among the ordinary occurrences of every-day, or rather night, life; but with the growth of modern science and general scepticism concerning the supernatural the ghosts have been considerably exorcised. Now, if they come at all, they only put in an appearance at *séances* specially arranged for their reception, among people who have a strong belief in their reality. And when they come, fearing lest they should shock the delicate or refined feelings of the spectators, they bring their clothes with them. Cunning spirits! sagacious ghosts! They know full well "that the tailor makes the man," and that their decency, if not their respectability, might be challenged if they came wrapped only in the "garment of thought." Well might an American wit observe that "he could understand the ghost of his great grandfather; but for the life of him he could not understand the ghost of his grandfather's overcoat."

Modern Spiritualists acknowledge no essential relation between brain and soul. To them the soul is an entity, that has existed from all eternity, and acts just as well—often much better—apart from than when existing in connection with the body. Taking it for granted that he has always existed, the Spiritualist argues that the "human soul" must be immortal, and he does not allow such matters as those relating to the soul of brutes and to the personal immortality of idiots—which have been already considered—to trouble the even tenour of his thoughts. Nor does it strike him as at all strange that the spirits who make their appearance at his "friendly gatherings" generally come on foolish errands, and know no more than the "medium" through whom they communicate their nonsense.

The spirit of "John King" makes his entrance silently and with ghostly tread, and everybody at once recognises his well-cut features and his long straggling beard; and when Mrs. Guppy comes mysteriously through the ceiling, and leaves no trace of the spot through which her portly body slid, there are no evidences of surprise or incredulity. "The greater the miracle, the stronger the belief," is especially true in regard to Spiritualists. Even Dr. Nichols, whom I know to be an exceedingly thoughtful gentleman, said a short time ago, in answer to me, that he had seen a

chair "deliberately walk across the room." But the learned Doctor was silenced when I further inquired how long this article of furniture "deliberated" before it commenced its journey? If the chair deliberated at all, it must have thought—that is, chairs must be classed among things intelligent, and the probability is—if the reasoning of Spiritualists on this point is at all valuable—have souls also.

Even admitting that extraordinary psychical phenomena really do occur, that is no reason for believing that man's soul or personality is immortal. If phenomena happen which we, in our ignorance, are unable to understand, that affords no ground for the allegation that no possible combination of matter and force could produce them. For man to say that nature cannot account for such and such a result is for him to declare that he knows the limits of Nature's capabilities, which is tantamount to the declaration that man can, with truth, dogmatically say, "Nature can go so far and no farther." Besides, if the soul is something different from the body, and distinct altogether from matter, how is it that this "immaterial" element can mingle with, or in any way affect, matter? And, if the soul can exist as well without as with the body, how is it that it ever clothes itself with such a useless encumbrance? Moreover, if it is said that the soul thinks, recollects, classifies, judges, may it not be reasonably asked what purpose the brain serves, and whether it would not have been quite as easy for God to have made the brain to perform all these functions, without complicating matters by the introduction of the "immortal element" of which man knows nothing?

In absolute despair, the theologian and the Spiritualist proclaim in chorus that the belief in the immortality of the soul is a comforting faith, especially to those whose lives are miserable on earth, and who, if they did not expect to live again when their bodies had crumbled to dust, would not endure the pain and suffering to which "flesh is heir," but would "take up arms against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, end them."

But is the desire of man for a future life of happiness to be considered a proof that he will get it? Are our wishes to be regarded as the measure of truth? Do not thousands of men desire to achieve success in various walks of life, and yet lamentably fail to accomplish their purpose, how-

ever noble it may be? I have known men who have bid fair to win honourable distinction for themselves, who, in the end, have died in poverty and wretchedness, despite their firm belief that they would one day achieve the greatest success. Not one-hundredth part of the seeds that are sown in the earth blossom into flower and come to maturity; and out of the hundreds of thousands—nay, millions—of children born into the world, few, indeed, ever attain to manhood. The desire for a future life, therefore, affords no reasonable ground for its reality.

Some theologians have said that the idea of annihilation is nothing short of horrible; while, on the contrary, lofty thoughts and silent meditations on life in heaven are comforting and soothing to the soul. Yet, when we are dead, there are no dreams of hell flames to disturb the everlasting sleep. In the beautiful words of Colonel Ingersoll:—"Upon the shadowy shore of Death the sea of trouble casts no waves. Eyes that have been curtained by the everlasting dark will never know again the touch of tears. Lips that have been touched by eternal silence will never utter another word of grief. Hearts of dust do not break; the dead do not weep; and I had rather think of those I have loved and those I have lost as having returned—as having become a part of the elemental wealth of the world. I would rather think of those as unconscious dust; I would rather think of them as gurgling in the stream, floating in the clouds, bursting in the foam of light upon the shores of worlds; I would rather think of them as inanimate and eternally unconscious, than to have even a suspicion that their naked souls had been clutched by an orthodox god." If, however, we have an immortal soul, it must be remembered that disbelief will not harm it. Scepticism has no power against an immortal essence; but surely, in deciding, each for ourselves, this great problem, we should not be led away by prejudice or sentiment, but should view the facts in all their naked force. Looking at the subject in its purely scientific aspect, and weighing the facts with a full desire to arrive at truth, I am led to close with Carl Vogt, the great German scientist, who, as the result of deep study and wise research, says: "Physiology decides definitely and categorically against individual immortality, as against any special existence of the soul. The soul does not enter the foetus, like the evil

spirit into persons possessed, but is a product of the development of the brain, just as muscular activity is the product of glandular development. So soon as the substances composing the brain are aggregated in a similar form will they exhibit these same functions. We have seen that we can destroy mental activity by injuring the brain. By observing the development of the child we also arrive at the conviction that the activity of the soul progresses in proportion as the brain is gradually developed. The fœtus manifests no mental activity, which only shows itself after birth, when the brain requires the necessary material condition. Mental activity changes with the periods of life, and ceases altogether at death." Yet, if there is no personal immortality for man, at least we have the consolation of knowing that there is a practical immortality for the race. Good deeds leave their indelible impress upon the book of nature, and the influence an unknown good man exerts in the world can never perish. The silent deeds of goodness done by a loving mother for her child, the generosity of the philanthropist, the heroism of the reformer, produce good fruit and add lustre and nobility to the human character in succeeding generations. And when a dear brother dies we will say, in the words of the Freethought poet, Saladin :—

Was he brave? We'll bear his courage
 Down the rushing stream of time.
 Was he wise? Then may his wisdom
 Make our stunted lives sublime.
 Was he kind? We'll bear his kindness
 To the savage battle van,
 And bandage with his mantle shreds
 The bleeding heart of man.

Heap the red earth on our brother,
 And lay him to his rest,
 After life's weird, fitful mystery,
 Close to Terra's kindly breast ;
 Another phase in Nature's modes,
 And this we know alone,
 Nor dare to tread in blasphemy
 The shores of the Unknown.