

Original.

ON MYSTERIES.

Vidimus nunc per speculum in aenigmate.

"We see now as through a glass darkly."—1 Cor. xiii.

All nature abounds with mysteries: and there is not the least part of it, which man in his present state can fully comprehend. My present act of throwing down my thoughts on paper, is it not a mystery which lies beyond the utmost reach of my understanding! For what relation have those strokes of the pen with the thoughts that are just now rising in my mind! or how can the ideas of a spiritual being, which are themselves as void of shape and figure as the soul that produces them; and which are always passing on in rapid succession after one another; how can they be thus arrested and rendered stationary and permanent? How can they be thus brought forth, I know not whence, to public view, and made visible to the corporeal eye? Is not this a kind of incorporating power, by which we give something like a body to that which is purely intellectual?

By this wonderful and unaccountable art of transforming our thoughts into letters, we may converse with our fellow creatures without the help of the voice; we may lay open the innermost recesses of our hearts to our most distant friends; we may even continue to give counsel, and impart instruction to our latest posterity.

But what shall we say of the motion of the fingers, which corresponds so exactly with our thoughts, as almost instantaneously to lay them down on a smooth surface in a visible shape! And how quickly is this language of the hand understood by the eye, to which it is addressed; and through which it passes into the mind of the beholder. The eye has no sooner caught it, than the tongue, that no less wonderful vehicle of thought, is ready to express it in sound, and thus to communicate it to the ear, that other inlet to the human mind.

Equally wonderful is the sense of touch, which gives instant warning to the soul that something presses upon her machine. To say nothing of the taste and smell, both which senses, if nearly examined, are equally astonishing and inexplicable; what is more inconceivable than the cause itself of the above phenomena; the union of the soul with the body? Of a spirit with a small portion of matter which she animates and puts in motion: with which she is so exclusively connected as immediately to influence no other visible part of the creation; but by the medium of which she can extend her influence to other bodies, besides that which she inhabits; and even communicate to the souls of others her own thought and sensations.

Were we to descend more to particulars, we should be still more convinced that we are in every respect a perfect mystery even to ourselves. How shall we account for that faculty of the soul, the memory, which holds forth to us as in a clear mirror, the exact image of the scenes we have beheld, and of the persons we have known in our past life; which produces when desired, true copies of the books we

have read, and turns up to us the very page we wish to cite? Which so carefully registers whatever we see or hear done or spoken? And how happens it at times that when called upon to bring forward certain facts, which she owns she has in her keeping, she seems so much at a loss to find them at the moment; and often lays them before us when they are neither called for nor expected? Is it that she has thrown them by rather carelessly, like lumber in some crowded apartment of the brain, and therefore cannot discover them till a particular search is made after them; and then of her own accord she holds them forth to us, as if to prove that she has not wholly lost them. How is she able in such a small space to store up all her ideas; and in so regular a manner, that, as we perceive, the most similar are always classed near each other. For how often, in endeavouring to recollect any word or name, if we happen to start a similar idea, or the leading syllable of the expression we strive to recall, is the word or thing we seek for instantly turned out. No, perhaps, unlike the orderly merchant, who ranges his goods in the most regular manner, after looking through his warehouse, where articles of the same kind are kept, he thus at last finds the particular thing that is called for.

No less wonderful is the fancy; which though much of a kin to memory, yet in this is different from it, that it not only traces to our mind real scenes which we have witnessed, but also delights in creating new and imaginary ones. Through what little worlds of its own creation does it not lead us in our sleep; when it makes us acquainted with persons whom none ever knew; and travel through countries which none ever beheld, but the single individual whom it is pleased to conduct.

Who shall more easily explain the other two powers of the mind, the will and the understanding; which, though faculties of the same identical being, and made to be always in unison and concord together, are often, however, at such variance with each other! For every one feels the truth of the poet's proverb:

*Viduo meliora probaque**Deteriora sequor.**I see and approve what is right, yet follow what is wrong.*

By the will we are indeed constituted masters of our own actions, or free agents; yet still the understanding is given us to be a check upon our conduct. Or rather this inward light of the soul is held out to us to direct us on in our journey through life; and to show us what we are to seek and what we are to shun, for our comfort in this world and in the next. The will, therefore, though free, is intended to be led on by the understanding; and if it ventures to walk without it, it walks in the dark, and is sure to stumble.

But what is this will, which so often determines against the understanding?—Or that understanding which checks the will; chides it, for what it does amiss; applauds it for what it has done well, and directs it how it ought to act? Or how can one pure spirit be thus so much at variance with itself? To be sure this ar-

gues in us some imperfection, which can be accounted for only by the fall of man: for in his original innocence and perfection his will could have been but an assent to his reason and understanding.

But if we pass from the invisible to the visible part of ourselves, the body, is not all that we observe in it equally inexplicable? Let the most learned philosopher explain to me, if he can, the astonishing change that takes place in us of our meat and drink into our flesh and blood. Let him tell me how my blood is sent bounding through my veins in a perpetual flow. How the various juices, that compose it, are secreted and sent, each to form its own portion of the wonderful frame.—Some to form the eye, others the hair, the teeth, the nails, the skin, flesh, bones, marrow, sinews, brain, and a thousand other parts of the admirable machine. Let him tell me how each finds its way to its own department, and with what a discerning hand nature separates from these, and casts off whatever is useless, hurtful and superfluous. In this he will be forced to confess his ignorance. He knows that all this happens in himself; but how it happens he cannot tell. He can only admire the wisdom of him, who is the author of such a wonderful work.

But if we must confess that we are a perfect mystery even to ourselves, how can we pretend to know better those things that are without us? Which is that single object within the whole compass of nature, the essence and origin, the properties, mechanism and design of which we can fully and with certainty explain?

The first object in the universe to excite our admiration is the sun, that imparts light, heat and life to all creatures. Who can give me a satisfactory account of him? The astronomer will calculate to me his immense distance from our earth, and the enormous and almost inconceivable bulk of his sphere. He will account to me for the manner in which he gives the day and the night, and varies the seasons of the year. And, when he has done so, is he sure that all this is more than mere plausible conjecture? Still has he not explained to me the nature of that ocean of fire, which is ever burning without being consumed: which is every moment losing such an immense flood of its substance, without suffering the least visible diminution for so many ages. How then is he fed with his fuel; or how is his substance, so much impaired, instantly renewed.

What more satisfactory account can he give me of the moon, planets, and stars? What are those irregular spots scattered over the surface of the moon? Those belts observed with the telescope on the disk of Jupiter, which so often change their situation and appearance? That prodigious fiery ring that encircles Saturn? What are these bodies themselves? Perhaps so many worlds inhabited like ours; and by what sort of creatures, and for what end? What is that comet just now blazing above our heads? Whence

*In this age of wonders two comets have lately made their appearance; one in 1803, and another in 1811.

this stranger wandering among the host of heaven. Whither does he tend with such amazing rapidity, and in a direction so different from that of all the rest? Alas! all the astronomer's knowledge here ends but in queries unresolved. His mind is lost in a world of conjecture; and after all his learned disquisitions and demonstrations, he must end by acknowledging his profound ignorance of all these things.

But if we alight from these sublime contemplations, in which we can only amuse ourselves with endless vague suppositions, and come to examine those objects which lie more within the sphere of our observation, are we more able to account for them? No, not even for those which we view close around us; which we see, touch, taste, and smell.

What is that earth on which we tread? How wonderful and unaccountable its substance, from which all the creatures existing here below derive their substance; which affords to all the plants and trees their various juices, without ever confusing or blending them improperly; or giving to one what belongs to another. What is that air which we breathe? that invisible fluid so essentially necessary for life; which sweeps in every direction round the surface of our globe, is inhaled in their watery caverns by the inhabitants of the deep; insinuates itself into every thing; even penetrates to the bowels of the earth, and by its sudden expansion, and prodigiously incalculable elastic force, shakes at times whole kingdoms from their very foundations? What is the distinct nature of this fluid? Chemists may weigh, dissect, and decompose it; and, at every step they make in their curious and useful researches, they discover new mysteries, nor can they ever say they have arrived at the *ne plus ultra*, the primary elements of things. The same may be said of the fire and water; both fluids, like the air, though all the three so very distinct and different from one another.—The fire in particular, the most subtle of all fluids, the very nature of which is to disencumber itself of all other substances, to rise aloft, and to dissipate itself freely in the ethereal void; how is it so closely imprisoned nevertheless; and, contrary to its seeming essential activity and mobility, shut up in an inert state in almost every substance; particularly in the flint, and in steel and combustibles of every kind? By this stupendously restrictive law Almighty God has chained down this most volatile of all the elements; and has put it every where in our power to call forth when we please that light and heat, so absolutely necessary for us in our present state of existence; and were he but for one moment to suspend this law, we should instantly see this world in a blaze, and the prophecy fulfilled of the final conflagration of the universe.

Who has yet been able to account in a satisfactory manner for the *Aurora Borealis*, or Northern Lights; for the lightning and thunder? If they are, as seems probable, of the same nature with the electric fluid, are we for all this the wiser? Or is not the electricity itself as