

The Catholic.

Quod semper; quod ubique; quod ab omnibus.

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ON MYSTERIES.

Videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate.

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 these 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 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 communicates to the souls of others her own thoughts 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, 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 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 endeavoring 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. Not, 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, she thus at last finds the particular thing that is called for.

No less wonderful is the fancy; which though much of a kin with the 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:

Video 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 shew 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 argues in us some imperfection, which can be accounted for only by the fall of man: for in his original state of innocence and perfection his will could have been but an assent to his reason or 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?