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ARTICLE VI.

JAMES MARSH AND COLERIDGE.

BY PROFESSOR JOHN WRIGHT BUCKHAM.

SOMEWHAT apart from the centers of education, in the beautiful Champlain Valley, where for a hundred years Vermont University has been performing earnest and efficient service to the cause of learning, President James Marsh accomplished a work for which American philosophy will always be his debtor. The man was as modest as the institution of which he was head. The impulses and aims under which he worked were singularly pure and disinterested. He was a student of philosophy by divine appointment, and he felt it. This was his high calling, and he resolutely adhered to it.

Born at Hartford, Vt., in 1794, the son of a farmer, James Marsh entered Dartmouth College at nineteen and graduated in 1817. His chief characteristic as a student, as of many another man of mark, was his ambition to acquire a broad and systematic conception of human knowledge rather than proficiency in any one department. He read widely and thoughtfully. Two-years' connection with the college as tutor gave him further opportunity to explore and acquire, and he carried to Andover Seminary an exceptionally broad and thorough collegiate education. Here, also, his thirst for comprehensiveness would not permit him to confine his mind to the studies of the course, and he indefatigably pursued studies in literature and history, science and philosophy.

In addition to the study of Kant's "Critique," he undertook to read through the works of Plato and to make a copious analysis of each dialogue, while carrying on his regular studies. In a letter written at this time he shows how extended were his excursions into the subtleties of theology, by vividly portraying the difficulties and dangers of the "ill-starred adventurer who plunges into the metaphysical depths of controversial theology!" He must not only "unravel the mysteries of fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute, etc., without getting lost in their mazes, but, while floundering in an everlasting 'hubbub wild' of ancient learning, crazed and made to dance, like Epicurus's atoms, to the 'harmonious discord' of some German metaphysical bagpipe, he must be careful to keep his balances nicely adjusted, and weigh with statistical accuracy the 'hot, cold, moist, and dry' of these 'embryo atoms. . . . Truly a man in such a course—if, like Dante, he has his Beatrice, or divine love, for a guide—may arrive at heaven at last; but, like Dante, he must do it by first going through hell and purgatory." Nevertheless he deliberately chose this course as his own; nor was his faith lost in the labyrinth.

At the close of his course Mr. Marsh formed the quixotic plan of returning to his father's farm to carry on "in independence and leisure" the studies which he felt constrained to follow; but the intellectual atmosphere of the farm was not, as might be expected, stimulating, and he soon resigned his bucolic ambition to seek some position, educational or literary, in which he could work to better advantage.

After a long and trying period of suspense, in which he exhibited admirable patience and self-control, he was at length, through the influence of his friend, Rev. Dr. Rice, of Virginia, appointed Professor of Languages in Hampden

Sidney College. Here he remained about three years, doing excellent work and carrying forward his studies—especially in Hebrew—vigorously. It was here that he began the translation of Herder's "Spirit of Hebrew Poetry." On October 14, 1824, he married Miss L. Wheelock, of Hanover, New Hampshire.

In 1826 came his appointment as president of the University of his native State. This was an honor—such was the feeble condition of the University—accompanied with serious responsibilities and uncertainties, but he accepted the position. For, to quote the words of his Memoir, written by Dr. Joseph Torrey, "to reestablish in the public confidence and favor an institution which seemed on the very verge of extinction, appeared to him an object worthy of his highest efforts; and he saw, moreover, an opportunity—the most favorable that could be desired—for introducing such improvements in the system of discipline and instruction as were called for by the wants of the age." The improvements which he advocated and, to a degree at least, introduced, were mainly in the direction of greater liberty in the choice of studies, and of a more parental college government in which social and moral influence should have greater prominence. Thus early do we find this broad and far-seeing mind anticipating the salutary advancements in collegiate study and discipline of which we are now beginning to enjoy the advantage. These ideas and others cherished by President Marsh were embodied in a pamphlet entitled "An Exposition of the Course of Instruction and Discipline in the University of Vermont," which was sent to many prominent educators, and undoubtedly influenced other institutions in the same direction. We know that President Porter had a profound regard for Dr. Marsh, and the paternal, or, if we may call it so, fraternal, attitude toward

students, of which Yale's president was so prominent an exemplar, may have been, to some degree at least, owing to the influence of President Marsh. At all events, the youthful president of Vermont's then miniature University cherished ideas of education which have proved to be full of utility and power.

But now philosophy, doubtless in connection with the instruction in its principles which he was called upon to give, began to assume greater and greater sway over the attention and love of this indefatigable student and enthusiastic scholar. He wrote for the *Christian Spectator* a discriminating and able review of Professor Stuart's "Commentary on Hebrews," in which the philosophical principles underlying the interpretation of Scripture are uppermost in the treatment.

On an eventful day in this period of his life there came into his possession (in a sense more real than is often attached to that word) a copy of Coleridge's "Aids to Reflection." It produced an impression upon him that no book save the Bible had paralleled. Not that its principles were new to him. He had already found them in Plato and Kant, although he acknowledged that he was largely indebted to Coleridge for his understanding of the latter. His study of philosophy and theology had been already extensive and thoughtful, and the axioms of Coleridge came to him, not so much as revelations, as the enflowered and perfect statements of truths which had been struggling for expression in his own mind. Lonely as he was in his dissatisfaction with the formal and uninspiring theology of the time, this book came to him as the message of a kindred and greater soul speaking from the housetops truths which had been but whisperings to himself. To get these truths before his fellow-countrymen in such a way as to impress them upon contem-

porary thought now became the ambition of President Marsh. He felt that his task was difficult and hazardous. The philosophy of Locke and the Scotch school reigned supreme. Hobbes and Hume, and the school of which they were leaders, gave philosophy a materialistic and sensuous character which was reflected in the labored and artificial theology of Paley and Brown. In advocating a *spiritual* philosophy Dr. Marsh felt that he was giving a challenge to the dominant philosophy which would bring the *odium theologicum* upon his head. He confesses as much in the "Preliminary Essay" which he wrote as an introduction to his famous edition of the "Aids to Reflection," published by him in order to disseminate the tenets of his master. The "Preliminary Essay" is the writing of Dr. Marsh by which he is chiefly known, It was afterward prefixed to the London edition, and also to the American edition of Coleridge.

A brief outline of this "Essay" will give some idea of its contents, though not of the admirable spirit and movement which animate it. It opens with a tribute to the value of *reflection*, which it is the primary object of Coleridge's work to promote. Then follows an allusion to the influence which the book is likely to have upon prevailing theological topics, an influence which the writer thinks may be disturbing, but cannot fail to be beneficial. The subject of the treatise is defined to be *a philosophical statement and vindication of the distinctly spiritual and peculiar doctrines of the Christian system*, the aim being to show that *Christian faith is the perfection of human reason*.

In order to vindicate this idea as a rational one, and this purpose as wise, the essayist enters upon an admirable treatment of the relation of philosophy to religion, in the course of which he states with great emphasis that "it is not the

method of the genuine philosopher to separate his philosophy and religion, and, adopting his principles independently in each, leave them to be reconciled or not as the case may be; he has and can have rationally but one system, in which his philosophy becomes religious and his religion philosophical." He pertinently adds: "If any dispute the necessity of thus combining the study of philosophy with that of religion, I would beg them to point out the age, since that of the apostles, in which the prevailing metaphysical opinions have not distinctly manifested themselves in the prevailing views of religion." While insisting thus strongly upon the vital connection between philosophy and religion, Dr. Marsh does not fail to admit "that a man may be truly religious and essentially a believer at heart while his understanding is sadly bewildered with the attempt to express philosophically what yet he feels and knows spiritually," and offers the following profound and suggestive observation: "It is indeed impossible for us to tell how far the understanding may impose upon itself by partial views and false disguises without perverting the will or estranging it from the laws and authority of reason and the Divine Word." While thus admitting the possible coexistence of a genuine faith with an imperfect philosophy, he still insists that errors of the understanding are obstacles to the truth and ought to be corrected.

The special defects in the prevailing system of metaphysics, as they appear to him, he proceeds to point out as (1) a theory of the will which denies its freedom, and (2) the too close identification of the natural with the spiritual. The "Essay" at this point assumes a somewhat controversial tone, but the cause is a good one, and the sincerity and ability of the argument awaken sympathy. The famous distinction between the Reason and Understanding receives attention. Dr. Marsh

closes this excellent introduction with a defense of the style and thought of Coleridge against the charge of being obscure and unintelligible, and with a warm eulogy of the worth and greatness of the man whose work he thus presents to the American public.

The book, thus sent forth, met with a reception which testified to its value and timeliness, and, while some opposition was excited, there is every reason to believe that what Noah Porter once said, writing for the *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA*, is true: "The influence of Coleridge on the philosophy and theology of New England has been, in some respects, what President Marsh desired it should be. It has opened new fields of inquiry and put us in possession of other modes of viewing religious truth. It has made our theology tolerant and free, and abated the harsh spirit of controversies. Above all, it has contended for a wakeful, thorough, and scientific theology."

In common with Coleridge, Dr. Marsh had an ardent admiration for Leighton, Jeremy Taylor, Howe, and others of the old English divines, and in the year following the appearance of his first edition of the "Aids to Reflection" he published the first volume of "Selections from the Old English Writers on Practical Theology." But the public did not receive this initial volume with sufficient favor to warrant him in continuing the undertaking.

A step was now taken by this devoted student, who had won for himself an enviable reputation for thorough scholarship in the world of letters, which discloses anew both his unselfish humility and his devotion to the pursuit of philosophy. Feeling that he did not possess the executive abilities to conduct successfully the affairs of the university in the financial embarrassment in which it was placed, in 1833 he

resigned the presidency and accepted the chair of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy.

From this time until his early death in 1842 he gave himself, with the true scholarly instinct which never left him, to the winning and imparting of truth concerning the human mind and spirit. He outlined a work on Logic and another upon Psychology, neither of which, however, was completed. Of the latter as it might have been, we have enough to form some conception in the "Remarks on Psychology," written for class-room use and published in the volume containing his Memoir. There is evident in the work of these mature years the same thirst after a principle of *unity* in knowledge which characterized the young scholar. That principle he found, in one aspect of it at least, where Kant and Coleridge found it, in the *Practical Reason* or the *Will*, where knowledge is transmitted into being.

In another aspect, this unity was sought by him in the harmonization and adjustment to one another of the sciences. He attempted this harmonization in a cursory way in the fragment, "Outlines of a Systematic Arrangement of the Departments of Knowledge, with a View to their Organic Relation to each other in a General System." But it was not for him, or for any one in his day, to form more than a superficial theory of this unity, for those deep and hidden affiliations of the sciences which have since come to the light give to us revelations of the true nature of their unity quite impossible for those of a previous generation to discern. It is often true, however, that he gives best service to the progress of knowledge who helps to establish an ideal for those to work out who have better opportunities for doing so than he possesses. This Dr. Marsh did.

After this brief sketch of the man and his writings, some

estimate may now be offered of his work and of the philosophy of which he was an exponent. His chief service, of course, was as interpreter, defender, and promulgator of the philosophy of Coleridge, and our conception of the value of what he accomplished for American philosophy will accordingly depend upon our estimate of Coleridge. One thing is beyond question, and that is, that Dr. Marsh was able, wise, and successful in his advocacy of the views of the great sage of Highgate. He showed that warm and disinterested enthusiasm in the defense of his philosophical hero which is so much more effective than the studied air of superiority with which the ideas of another are so often coldly and thanklessly appropriated and used. He was sincere, ardent, loyal in this philosophical attachment to a man whom he never knew. And yet he was no Boswell. His admiration was intelligent and discriminative. He found that ideas which had been lying dormant in his own mind had been strongly, eloquently, wisely set forth by another, and, like a true John the Baptist, he lent all his energy to preparing the way for their reception. How much better thus to elevate another than to fly one's own name from the pinnacle of appropriated ideas!

What, then, is the real and abiding value of the Coleridgean philosophy? It would not be correct to identify Coleridge's philosophy with Kantianism. It is less than the philosophy of Kant, and other than it, although based upon and derived from Kantianism. The one great philosophical principle upon which Coleridge concentrated his emphasis was that *there is a spiritual knowledge possible to man* by which alone he arrives at the highest reality. The key to this spiritual knowledge is the Will. To repeat his oft-quoted words: "If there be aught spiritual in man, the Will must be such. If there be a Will, there must be spirituality in man." The

Practical Reason, "comprehending the Will, the Conscience, the Moral Being, with its inseparable Interests and Affections," is the source of living and actual truths. The *Speculative Reason*, as distinguished from the Practical Reason, furnishes certain necessary and universal principles (e. g., cause and effect) to which all knowledge must be referred. The *Understanding*, or faculty judging according to sense, "applies its preconceptions of Quantity and Relation to the objects of sense, and thus refers them to Class and Name." The distinction between the Understanding and Reason Coleridge calls the *Gradus ad Philosophiam*, and to this distinction he gives great and constant emphasis. Reason is a "direct aspect of truth, an inward Beholding: it is fixed"; while Understanding is "discursive, and in all its judgments refers to some other faculty as its ultimate authority." Beasts have *Understanding*—that is, they can adapt means to ends, and that in some cases "even in *varying circumstances*." Reason is the distinguishing possession of man. It is supernatural, and upon it is based the *Spiritual Philosophy*, in which God, the soul, freedom, immortality, are the great realities. "All Christian truth"—this is Professor Tulloch's summary of Coleridge's teaching—"must have vital touch with our spiritual being . . . and be conformable to reason." "There was nothing," Tulloch continues, "absolutely new in this luminous conception, but it marked a revolution in the earlier part of the century."

Above all, and this is his greatest service, Coleridge defines the relation of Philosophy to the Christian Revelation. Indeed, he connects Philosophy and Theology as no other—at least no other Englishman—has ever done. His Theology is as philosophical as his Philosophy is theological. His understanding of the Bible was both rational and spirit-

ual, and he gave the church an interpretation of the true nature of its authority, which has become recognized as the great harbinger of the present increasingly intelligent conception of the Scriptures.

In the judgment of the most thoughtful the influence of Coleridge has been in the main both great and salutary, establishing sound philosophical principles and methods, quickening thought, and strengthening the position and influence of Christianity. If this judgment is correct, then the question as to the worth and usefulness of the work of James Marsh is determined. For, as has been shown, it was his chief aim and work to disseminate and illumine the philosophy of one for whose magnificent intellectual powers he had such profound regard. And he fulfilled his task well. He quotes with approval, in his "Preliminary Essay," the remark of a friend: "If you can once get the attention of thinking men fixed on the distinction between the reason and the understanding, you will have done enough to reward the labor of a life." That distinction and the real scope and significance of the Coleridgean philosophy President Marsh did succeed in large measure in getting before the thinking men of the country, and won a large degree of allegiance to it.

Professor William G. T. Shedd wrote in his introduction to the complete American edition of Coleridge, published by the Harpers in 1853: "With the exception of the clear and masterly essay prefixed to his edition of the 'Aids to Reflection,' by the late Dr. Marsh, whose premature decease in the full vigor of his powers and the full maturity of his discipline and scholarship is the greatest loss American philosophy has yet been called to meet, we call to mind no thoroughly elaborated and truly profound estimate of the philosophical opinions of Coleridge."

There are few finer instances of loyal and intelligent discipleship in literature than that of James Marsh. The honor which such an attachment brings is not less to the pupil than to the master. Yet independently of Coleridge, Dr. Marsh would have done good service to the cause of philosophy, for his convictions were his own. It is fruitless to speculate what direction his work would have taken if he had not had Coleridge as his philosopher and guide, but we may be quite sure that in some way he would have uttered his protest against the regnant philosophy and theology of his time and country. With his earnest belief in the freedom of the Will he could not but have controverted the prevailing Edwardean theory. With his antipathy to the sensation school of philosophy he must needs have told others of the sweet reasonableness of Idealism. With his conception of the conformity of reason and revelation he could not have remained silent concerning their underlying unity. As it was, he spoke through another, but he spoke *himself*.

We have purposely confined ourselves to the philosophical work of President Marsh, but his influence on theology was also not inconsiderable. The nature and origin of Sin were interpreted to him by his theory of the Will, and he drew attention away from the fall of Adam to fasten it upon the sinful individual. With respect to the Atonement he was regarded by many as heterodox, but, following Coleridge, he wisely insisted upon its manward influence, leaving the mystery of its Godward effect for more presuming and confident minds to fathom. The narrow theology held by many of his contemporaries found in him an expansion conformable to his broad philosophical principles, and he broadened others by his breadth.

Neither his philosophy nor his theology, it is true, is flaw-

less. It is not even what it would have been had he lived in our day. Viewed, however, in the light of his time and his advantages, this isolated, hard-pressed, earnest student merits high honor and lasting esteem as a worthy pioneer in American philosophy.

Said President Porter of him: "His modest demeanor, his amiable disposition, his freedom from craft and cunning, his obvious and ardent love of truth wherever it was to be found, the thoroughness of his scholarship, his iron diligence, his warm susceptibility to the good and the noble, and his disposition to master every subject in its principles—were such as to merit for him a reputation and an earthly reward far higher than he received." This is high praise, but it is confirmed by those who knew him as a man. As a philosopher his work proves him to be one of those who, in his own words, "escaping from the thralldom of the sensuous and the present, with large discourse of reason looking before and after, form their minds to the discovery and apprehensions of ultimate principles."