

THOUGHTS OF A SILENT MAN NO. 2

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“La nature n’est pour l’homme que les feuilles eparses de la Sybille, don’t nul, jusqu’a ce jour, n’a pu faire un livre.”¹

The tendency of philosophy in the seventeenth century was towards abstraction and mysticism. The high-toned mind, when lifting itself above common things, cherished a contempt for the claims of ordinary humanity, and lost itself in the pure vacuum of abstract truth; while the restless and fanciful thinkers of the age, unable to imp their wings to so bold a flight, reached only to the cloudy regions of mysticism, and like the traveller to the Hartz mountains², beheld their own shadows magnified into giants by the fog.

The progress of the human mind is onward, but it pursues a very winding way. Accordingly, we find the succeeding century marked by a spirit of analysis and skepticism;—nothing but demonstrable truth was received. The mind—the organ of intelligence, was alone called into exercise; while doubt was thrown upon the very existence of the soul; that dweller in the inner temple—that recipient and exponent of God’s truth through consciousness.

In the progress of the human intellect, we now behold another phase. The present is eminently the age of enquiry. Men speculate upon every thing; they seek to generalise all things. Every fact in nature, every truth in physics, is made the nucleus of a theory which, whether true or false, finds ready receivers. He who is content to satisfy his mind with the

¹ French translation: "For man, nature is not but the scattered leaves of the Sybil, for whom nothing, to this day, could make a book."

² Most likely referring to the highest mountain range in Northern Germany. Also spelled Harz.

exact sciences, and his soul with trusting faith, is regarded as one who lingers last in the march of intellect.

The habit of theorising upon every discovery in art or science, has given to the faculty of imagination, a much higher rank in the scale of mental power than philosophers of former times were willing to allow. In some men this faculty has all the power of a separate and distinct mind –a sort of “double” or ghost of the faculty of reason. Formerly men of imagination were poets, novelists, or painters, now we find them philosophers, metaphysicians and mechanicians. Once the highest province allotted to the imagination was the privilege of decorating truth; but now it often happens that while reason busies herself defining, arranging and combining some abstract theory, imagination is employed in analysing and assimilating the truths of science.

But, as in former times, the spirit of analysis led by imperceptible gradation to scepticism, so it seems to me, that in modern days, the habit of generalization tends decidedly to materialism.³ Take, for instance, a book recently published, which for lucid arrangement and admirably sustained generalization, is unsurpassed by any work on the same subject: I mean “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.”⁴ It contains no new facts, but is filled with groups of facts, (so to speak) which come to us as new, because they appear so striking in their arrangement. The author is no materialist; on the contrary, he takes great pains to disclaim all such tendencies, yet what a storehouse of materialism would the book afford to one who doubted every truth which did not come through the intellect. His own faith in his theories adds an irresistible charm to his arguments, and it requires a most determined examination of truth to detect in many instances the workings of his imagination from the action of his reason. His system of progression has no limit short of Deity, and, notwithstanding the experience of thousands of years tells us that however the human mind may have advanced, the physical structure has known no other changes than such as are made by climate and modes of life, he talks of that perfect type of Divinity to which man may hereafter attain. Have we not already had in the incarnate Divinity the most perfect type of exalted humanity? Or can it be believed that when “God was made man and dwelt among us,” he wore the semblance of an inferior humanity, which, to the noble race destined to

³ A philosophical idea that matter is the fundamental natural substance, or the basis for all phenomena.

⁴ A bestseller book in Victorian society on the history of the Earth—from the formation of the solar system to the origins of mankind. Its first edition was anonymously published. The author’s name, Robert Chambers, was revealed in 1884, forty years after the first edition. He chose anonymity to protect his publishing business that might be affected by the controversial content of the book. The book received praise and criticism from both the theologians and scientists.

succeed us, will seem as degraded in the scale of being as do the various tribes of *Simia*⁵ in comparison with the present race of mankind?

In his theory of the geological and vegetable transformation, many discoveries in science seem to bear him out; and although facts might be adduced which would at least throw some doubts upon it, yet his picture of creation at the period of “carboniferous formation,”⁶ is so sublime that we would fain believe it as true as it is grand. Its suggestiveness is positively overpowering. He has given us only a few noble strokes of the pencil, but it would require all the genius of a Milton to fill up the outlines he has traced. When he applies his system to animate nature, however, we feel its fallacy. The merest tyro in physiology can bring the most decided testimony against him. All the laws of nature (as they are called) prove the impossibility of generating superior races from inferior ones, or even of producing from the union of the two, a species capable of continuous reproduction. It may be answered that the Almighty, who made those laws, is superior to them; but this does not settle the question, since, if we believe in a departure from the laws of progression in a single instance, we may as well believe in the miracle of instantaneous creation.

There is something frightful to feeble human nature, in the idea of necessity ruling with iron rod over earth’s helpless children. How can we imagine heaven filled only by an infinite Intelligence to which we are but as atoms of dust on the rolling wheel of progression? A finite mind shrinks before such a fanciful truth. Jean Paul has given us some idea of such a state of orphanage in his terrific “Dream.”⁷—His powerful imagination has carried the horrors of atheism into the world of spirits. He brings before us a vision of the souls of buried children, wandering blindly through a dark vague space, and calling vainly upon a heavenly Father, while the voice of the risen Christ mournfully replies, “we are all orphans—we have no Father in heaven.”

“He who first called God our Father, knew more of the human heart than the most profound thinkers of the age.” The author of the “Vestiges,” may well be classed among the profound thinkers. His book is one of great power, and greater suggestiveness, yet one of his readers at least closed the volume with a feeling of deep sadness. As I sat in my lonely room,

⁵ Refers to one of the four genera (*Homo*, *Simia*, *Lemur*, and *Vespertilio*) of the Order Primates as divided by Carolus Linnaeus in his book *Systema Naturae* (1758). *Vespertilio* contained bats. *Homo* contained humans. *Lemur* contained four lemurs and a colugo. And *Simia* was the “wastebasket taxon” for the rest of the primates that did not fit elsewhere. Linnaeus made the distinction between *Homo* and *Simia* mainly to avoid conflict with the church, which at the time, would not readily accept such ideas hinting toward evolutionism. In 1929, the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature suppressed the *Simia* genus.

⁶ The period during the Paleozoic Era lasting from about 359.2 to 299 million years ago. The English term “Carboniferous” refers to the rich deposits of coal there and around the world during this period of a uniform, tropical, and humid climate.

⁷ No information on Jean Paul or his “Dream” could be found.

pondering over its facts and fancies, my thoughts shaped themselves into the language of earnestness—which is poetry; and safe in my own insignificance, I thus spoke out:

To the Author of the “Vestiges of Creation.”

Self-missioned Leader through Creation’s maze!
Dost thou interpret thus God’s mighty scheme—
Weaving the cobweb fancies of a dream
O’er each grey vestige of His mystic ways?
When thus ‘mid chaos thou didst blindly grope,
Gathering new links for matter’s heavy chain,
Dwelt there not in thy soul the secret hope
That some strong truth would rend the bond of pain,
Which fixed thee to Progression’s iron wheel?
Oh teach not suffering earth such hopeless creed:
For heavy were her curse if doomed to feel
That, in her frequent hour of bitter need,
Her lifting eye of prayer could only see
Necessity’s stern laws, graven on eternity.



EDITOR'S NOTE

The following article by Rudolph Hertzman is a praise of the contemporarily published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, “a small bomb” in British science at the time. The book on the history of the Earth—from the formation of the solar system to the origins of mankind—was a bestseller in Victorian society. The author’s name—Robert Chambers—was not revealed until 1884, forty years after the first edition. Chambers was a successful British publisher who supported scientific progress. He chose anonymity, fearing that the controversy would ruin his publishing business.

The controversy of *Vestiges* stems from its themes of the grand picture of the progressive evolution of life on Earth that contradicted the natural theology of the time. Besides the church, the book also had its scientific critics. The big scientific figures (namely, Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin) at the time viewed Chambers’ idea of evolution weakly supported and unsophisticated.

Yet, although *Vestiges* became a neglected work for scientific scholarship due to its feeble speculations of evolution, the book arguably laid the foundation for evolutionary thought and aided the continuous influence of European thought on American discourse. Chambers incidentally created an interaction among the leading scientific names of the 19th century, as well as influenced public dialogue, which was becoming widely open in America with the rise of the American periodicals and print. Chambers prepared the public as well as the scientific community for the more developed hypotheses on the complex and controversial topic of evolution, paving the path for the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection in *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859.

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