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REPLY

TO

PROFESSOR ALLEN THOMSON'S ADDRESS

AS PRESIDENT OF THE BIOLOGICAL SECTION

AT THE

BRITISH ASSOCIATION

HELD IN EDINBURGH, AUGUST, 1871.

BY

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REGISTERED BY THE COUNCIL OF MEDICAL EDUCATION.

Original Discoverer of Anæsthesia by the Inhalation of Narcotic and Stimulating Vapours; Discoverer of Electro-biology; Author of "The Physiology of the Brain and Nervous System;" Graduate of the Berkshire Medical College, Massachusetts; Member of the Massachusetts Medical Society; formerly Student of the London and Paris Schools of Medicine; late Principal Physician to the Cholera Hospital, Mexico; Special Commissioner from the Anthropological Society of London to the Paris International Exhibition, 1867.

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LONDON: 199 BROMPTON ROAD, S.W.

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August, 1871.

REPLY, &c.

“Wise men agree, or ought to agree, in this—that there is but one way in the
“knowledge of nature’s work—the way of observation and experiment.”—REID.

To Professor Allen Thomson.

SIR,—Your Address delivered in Section D, Biology, at the British Association held in Edinburgh, has been read by me. As the original discoverer of *Electro-biology*, *Phreno-magnetism*, and *Anæsthesia* by the inhalation of narcotic and stimulating vapours in rendering surgical operations painless, I regret exceedingly having been absent from the meeting this year, if only to have had the opportunity of publicly rectifying the erroneous impressions which your Address, if not rebutted, must produce on the minds of men, who may be unduly influenced by your reputation and high standing as a man of science. It is unquestionably perfectly true, that impostors, tricksters, mountebanks, and every other form of charlatanism, is connected with and accompanies the early development of every discovery: more particularly is this the case with the abnormal phenomena of *the nervous system*.

Can this excite surprise? It is this very medium which gives us consciousness of our existence, which puts us into actual relationship with the universe. Somnambulism in its manifold stages—comatous and semi-comatous epilepsy, catalepsy, hysteria, trance, and artificially induced abnormal conditions of the nervous system—have been arbitrarily regarded by the medical profession as topics without the pale of scientific investigation; for it is a notorious fact, that the physiology of those extraordinary states is at this moment unknown—a kind of *terra incognita*, the exploration of which is attendant with dangers more potent than huge carnivora. Those who have dared to pass the *cordon* which an arbitrary, despotic clique have defined, are visited, as in this instance, with an outpouring of wrath and invective, as if they had been guilty of some heinous crime. He no doubt is a criminal, for he has had the temerity to tread on ground tabooed; he has broken the mythic chain of *conventional* investigation. The Profession must not forget that the immortal William Harvey, and the equally indefatigable Jenner, had to pass through the same ordeal of vindictive, sullen, jealous illiberality: hard words and uncharitable thoughts were the rewards of those great men in their day and generation. It is not, therefore, to be

expected, that those who devote themselves to the task of investigating those *mystic* and occult phenomena incidental to life itself can escape the fate of their predecessors.

We, however, ask no mercy's smile or pity's tear; we say, Lay on the agony of disappointed rage, that you are indebted for all that is known relative to the physiology of the brain and nervous system to that class of men whom you so sweepingly denounce as pseudo-physiologists, and use every other extravagant cognomen which the vocabulary of your vindictiveness could suggest. As a pioneer, whose labours are beyond the caprice of optional recognition, I feel proud to belong to that class you have so summarily denounced.

Let me attempt the analysis of some parts of your famous Address—the task is one not easy of accomplishment; to wit, you say,—

“That the phenomena, whether false or real, are in a great part dependent upon the natural principle of the human mind, placed, as it would appear, in dangerous alliance with certain tendencies of the nervous system. They ought not to be worked upon with the greatest caution, and they are one which cannot but result in failure, as their ambiguity only fully understood by the accomplished physiologist who is conversant with psychology.”

A more heterogeneous jargon of words were never placed in juxtaposition. Who can understand what is meant by the accomplished physiologist conversant—*with what?*—“PSYCHOLOGY?” That gentleman just referred to—Professor Allen Thomson—is a myth, the unicorn of the ancients, or the *vampire* of modern physicians.

The accomplished psychological physiologist! Thanks, many thanks, for these jumbling sounds. But then you go farther,—yes, you rush in where I fear to tread. Your dictum as to the standard of the best *established physical laws* is, indeed, curious. Our knowledge of the physical laws is indeed most limited, if they are to be made the absolute standard of further investigation. Why, it was only yesterday that we discovered the application of the spectrum to analyse the composition of worlds, whose distance is so great that no parallax is discoverable by the diameter of our puny orbit of 186 millions of miles!! It was only *yesterday* that electric telegraphy had no existence. Would any one prior to these *developments* and *applications* of physical science *have said* that they were not at variance with the *best established physical laws?* Where is the man whose temerity could say he would not have denounced the man who, only twenty years since, had declared the possibility of analysing the fixed stars, or of communicating our thoughts to the most remote parts of the earth, even more rapid than it revolves on its axis,—but as the ravings of a madman? *Now*, however, these are recognised facts, and the madman would be he who denied them.

Such has always been the onward course of discovery in every branch of science, more especially physiology. On coming into existence, being

encumbered and loaded with errors innumerable—a condition incidental to the *birth of truth*. It is the province of Science in its onward march to remove these excrescences, and raise the veil of error. Is it not in the accomplishment of this very object that the British Association holds its meetings?

As you have unhappily reverted to what the French Commission of the Academy did from 1825 to 1831, when Somnambulism and its allied topics had not been investigated, nor had the *conditions* for its investigation at that early period been ascertained—as they have since—the investigation must, necessarily, have been imperfect. Yet in the two last paragraphs of their Report these words are used:—

“Considered as an agent of physiological phenomena, or as a therapeutical means, magnetism (animal) ought to find a place within the sphere of medical science, and, consequently, only medical practitioners ought to employ it, or to superintend its employment, as is practised in the north of Europe.

“Lastly, the Commission could not verify, because it had no opportunity, the other faculties which magnetisers had stated to exist in somnambulists. But it has collected, and communicates to the Académie, facts sufficiently important to induce it to think that the Académie ought to encourage researches on animal magnetism as a very curious branch of psychology and natural history. Certainly we dare not flatter ourselves that we shall make you share entirely our convictions as to the reality of the phenomena which we have observed, and which you have neither seen nor followed, nor studied with or in opposition to us. We do not, therefore, expect from you a blind belief in our report; we conceive that a great part of the facts are so extraordinary that you cannot grant your belief to us; perhaps we ourselves should have refused your belief if we had changed places—you had come, as we, to announce them before this tribunal, to ourselves, who like you, at present, have *seen nothing, observed nothing, studied nothing, followed nothing* of them. We only require that you judge us as we should have judged you; that is to say, that you remain perfectly convinced that neither the love of the wonderful, nor desire of celebrity, nor any other interest whatever, has influenced us in our labours. We have been animated by motives more elevated, more worthy of yourselves—by the love of Science, and by the wish to justify the hopes which the Académie had conceived of our zeal and devotedness.

(Signed)

“BOURDOIS DE LA MOTTE, *President*.

“FOUQUIER, GUENEAU DE MASSY, GUERSENT, ITARD, LEROUX, MARC, THILLAYE, HUSSON (*Reporter*).”

I fear, for your own reputation, that you are in the position of the members of the Academy who were not in the Commission,—you have seen *nothing, observed nothing, studied nothing, and know nothing, of what you have so unceremoniously denounced, in language which is a*

curiosity, as the choicest collection of superlative adjectives ever applied to the annihilation of Animal Magnetism, Electro-biology, Phreno-magnetism: which, if *not* effected *now* by the *Herculean* effort you have made, they may (with your permission) have a prolonged existence, and be treated in future with more tenderness and charity. It certainly demands no small amount of moral courage for a man to withstand the withering sneers—ironical smiles—sarcastic gibes—of the *popular man*, who dares not utter a word which is non-conventional, as he might compromise his popularity. You obtained, or rather *provoked* (if the reports are correct) on several occasions, *laughter and applause*. I do not envy your ephemeral triumph. You fired a monster gun,—it made a *huge explosion*—noise. Noise,—no more! Then came the calm, the after-moment, when men reflect and see the folly of their ways.

The President of the British Association, Sir William Thomson, advances in his opening Address some hypothetical theories, startlingly speculative—"not according to the *best established physical laws*." As *ærolites* always reach the earth in an incandescent state, it seems to me difficult to imagine how moss, or lichen, or vitality could exist: but these ideas are "*the dictates of sound judgment*,"—not, certainly, a problem suggested by a pseudo-physiologist, or by an *accomplished physiologist conversant with psychology*. Still, they are advanced by the High Priest of the British Association. No matter how extravagant—that matters not, they have the sanction of authority: they are not only swallowed, but duly digested. Truly, we do not here strain at gnats, but swallow in one gulp the whole animal kingdom, with all the extra fixings: an extra *whale or two* is of no consequence, so long as it comes within the *pale* of that *cloak* which covers all eccentricities. All monomaniacal imaginings, the products of a distempered brain, even the ravings of the President of the British Association, are all rendered orthodox by OFFICIAL RECOGNITION,—'tis talismanic, and quiets our unruly questionings.

Your allusion to Professor Faraday and Dr. Sharpey is indicative of your weakness,—the old *rôle* of the cuttle-fish, who, when in a difficulty to cover his retreat, has to make "*a cloud*" in which he escapes.

But Professor Faraday said,—"*It is a curious sight to see a piece of wood, or an apple, or a bottle of water, repelled by a magnet; or taking the leaf of a tree and hanging it up between the poles, to see it take an equatorial position.*"

Some years prior to this it was supposed that *iron* alone was rendered magnetic; then it would have been not in accordance with the best established physical laws to have announced a contrary opinion.

No one respects more than myself the opinions of such men as the illustrious Faraday, Dr. Sharpey, Professor Huxley, Dr. B. W. Richardson, or any other men of science, on subjects with which they are competent to give an opinion. It is not to be imagined, that because a man is eminent in one department of science, that he necessarily is so in others. As a rule, it is

quite the reverse. Men who are celebrated in a *specialty*, have a very limited knowledge of subjects which do not demand their special investigation in connexion with the subject of their specialty. A man may be eminent as a musician, and comparatively idiotic in every other particular.

Except such men as Faraday, Sharpey, Huxley, Richardson, had devoted themselves specially to *psychological physiology*, their opinions are worthless on a subject like *Animal Magnetism*, *Electro-biology*, *Vital Photography*, *Phreno-magnetism*, &c.

Your confused expression, which no one can unravel, not even the accomplished psychological physiologist, to wit,—“*the natural principle of the human mind, and its dangerous alliance with certain tendencies of the nervous system;*” I think you must have been in the first stage of anæsthesia, by the inhalation of alcoholic vapours, when you wrote that sentence.

I am no wild enthusiast, advocating the statement of uneducated and unlearned persons with regard to phenomena, which, no doubt, *they honestly believe to exist*; for I cannot imagine every person an *impostor* because he happens to differ from myself in opinion, nor do I denounce him as being devoid of “common sense,” or of being a “pseudo-philosopher.” Had you been in the least degree conversant with the subject you are so sweepingly ignoring, then I could have treated your Address with that respect which your position as President of a section of the British Association demands. You have, however, chosen to depart from the path of your knowledge. You have throughout exhibited a total want of information on the theme which brought the *laughter* and the *applause*.

Some thirty years since, in Boston, Massachusetts, a Committee of thirty of the *most learned* of the three professions—clerical, legal, and medical—was appointed to investigate the phenomena of *Animal Magnetism*. After having thoroughly examined the phenomena, presented daily for several weeks, they unanimously adopted the following resolution, with a view to its publication, viz. :—

“*Resolved,—That while this Committee refrain from expressing any decisive opinion as to the science or principle of Animal Magnetism, they freely confess that in the experiments of Dr. Collyer certain appearances have been presented which cannot be explained on the supposition of collusion, or by a reference to any physiological principles known to them.*”

“*WILLIAM INGALLS, Chairman.*”

“*S. F. PLIMPTON, Secretary.*”

These gentlemen, many of whom now rank with Dr. Sharpey, Professor Huxley, or Dr. Richardson, were too honourable and high-minded to shirk the responsibility of stating modestly that what they saw was the truth, but not explainable on the supposition of *imposture* (as you please to state); nor did they call in the aid of “*psychological physiology.*” Why not say “a

"pancreatic substance," or "a peculiar instinct," or "special idiosyncrasy," or as a medical friend says, when he knows not what else to say, "a tempera-
"matic diathesis?" This is quite in keeping with your "accomplished
"psychological physiologist."

A more *ad captandum vulgus* use of words never were uttered by a learned Professor to an intellectual audience. Statements and assertions contrary to fact and experience are recklessly made and heralded to the world, with all the authority of the President of the Biological Section of the British Association held in Edinburgh—the Athens of the British Isles! If it had not been from the importance connected with the place and time of its delivery, I would have treated the Address as it merits—with *indifference*, and unworthy of my notice.

In conclusion, allow me to state that my work, just published by Mr. Renshaw, of the Strand, "*The Mysteries of the Vital Element*, in connexion with Dreams, Somnambulism, &c.," will explain many of the phenomena which have not yet been solved by your "*accomplished psychological physiologist*." Should you require the Report of the Boston Committee of Animal Magnetism (June, 1841), I will be most happy to furnish it to any member of the British Association. As showing how incorrect has been your *data* and statements, "*that no man of note*" has believed in Animal Magnetism, I may also name Van Helmont, La Place, Cuvier, Broca, Arnold, Pritchard, Elliotson, and many others equally eminent; hoping these are sufficient to cause you to pause in your future emanations to gratify a morbid popularity,—these names will, in a measure, counterbalance your illustrations on the negative side. It is not at all surprising that Professor Huxley should have requested the publication of your Address, —a more complete and caustic satire could not have been proposed, emanating as it did from such a source.

I conclude in the words of Humboldt, "Every discovery is but a step
"in advance towards something higher in the mysterious course of things."

I remain, yours, &c.,

ROBERT H. COLLYER.

199 Brompton Road, London, S.W.

August 5th, 1871.