

Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections

<http://archives.dickinson.edu/>

Documents Online

Title: "Suicide," by A. Herr Smith

Format: Commencement Oration

Date: July 9, 1840

Location: Orations-1840-S642s

Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Suicide.

40 24
7p

Benevolence is the prime attribute of divinity. And degenerate & fallen as is man, it cannot but be gratifying to discover that he still resembles, though 'tis but faintly, the image of his divine original. Hence to moralize and reform, has ever been the generous effort of the humane & benevolent. To arouse the moral energies of man's nature, unfold his sentient being, break down the strong bulwarks of self, and elevate him to that high standard, for which his mental & moral qualities so eminently qualify him, is still their aim. While however this is the aim, it cannot be concealed that many evils are tolerated, if not directly countenanced, whose influence is deleterious in the extreme and directly at variance with efforts the most virtuous. The pharos has indeed been reared and lit, to beam a man across the boisterous & heaving ocean of life, but the shoals & sand-bars so numerous in his track, are seldom wended; and naught but the floatings of an occasional spar, or the white waving signal of distress from some distant barge washed back, could inform him of their existence, or make known to him the sad story of their victims.

And among these quicksand, evils, noticed so slightly, and yet rendered so dangerous to life's busy voyagers, do we en in reckoning suicide? That against which the Eternal has fixed his cannon. -

To trace this custom however to its source, and unfold the depravity of that age in which it first originated, would be an undertaking by no means enviable, and 'tis to be

feared would exhibit humanity in no flattering light.

Obscene and barbarous however as is its origin, ^{heathen} like as is its nature, and much as it savors of an iron age, - setting aside as it does the relation of kindred & friends, and invading the sanctity of omnipotent power, it is nevertheless nurtured & cherished in an age boasting loudly of its refinement of taste and its purity of morals. ^{poets & novelists} Christians have not been wanting in every age, and least of all in the present, who could so far disregard the finer feelings of our nature, as to attempt openly & boldly to justify this practice; and perhaps he who would even now venture to oppose it might in the estimation of some hazard his claim to good sense and endanger his reputation for sanity.

The causes of suicides are various and numerous. To exhibit however all or even the greater part of them would be a fruitless endeavor; for they vary as circumstances vary. Thus it would be exceedingly hazardous to venture an explanation why one so perverts the natural uses of things, as to convert his kerchief into a halter, or his bed post into a gibbet; why another instead of sipping the nectar of the grape, makes a hydraulic pipe of his oesophagus & swallows acids by the gallon; or why a third instead of enjoying the ambrosial sweets of life turns his stomach into a laboratory, & sends down minerals and alkalis by the bushel. Each has a reason and *modus operandi* of his own. Thus the anbum might lover, whose phiz

so curiously overgrown with nature's wild spirits, would puzzle a zoologist to determine whether it belonged to the genus homo, or to that of the animal ycleped an ape, - because forsooth his mistress does not swear unalterable constancy to him, and adieu him as the bean ideal of all manly perfection, boldly revenges the indignity by piercing his jugular, and passing off into happy nonentity. The blue-eyed maiden, because per- adventure, her French gibberish, Italian sonnets, & Parisian habits, will not secure absolute idolatry from the object of her affection, suddenly imagines herself a mermaid, and leaving this vile earth, and its vile lords, delicately immeges into a fish pond. The pitiful miser, still grasping his pelf with his "cold skeleton hands", dancing at the jingle of dollars & cents, & bowing before his gold with an idolatry that would disgrace the veriest devotee of Eastern Chimes, takes advantage of a famine & like one of old, sells a mouse for an exorbitant price, and then starves himself with the money in his pocket. And last, the oughtest least, follows the sage philosophic experimenter, who like the poet of *Agrigentum*, to defy himself, plunges into the crater of a lime kiln, or like the frenchman to test the last struggle of nature, - suffocates himself with charcoal & lamp black, & bequeaths to ^{his} credulous posterity, a heterogeneous sheet, containing an account of his sufferings, with specific directions as to his *corpus defunctum*.

But although the proximate cause of suicide is

generally known, that which we can cease to be one of the ultimate causes, to wit newspaper immorality, is less obvious, though its influence is not the less direct and alarming. The gazette of the day it is urged would remain unread, were it not for the startling captions of murders, robberies, suicides with the detailed accounts of which they are constantly teeming; and hence the excess for the perverted taste of the public, seize with unwearied avidity upon every morsel that would tend to stimulate this morbid appetite. Conscious of this, the self-murderer is sure of his meed of fame; and though he may have beggared hapless orphans & lonely widows, ground with an iron hand toiling industry & robbed honesty of its cheering rewards, yea though even vice & crime & blood have marked his course, yet is his unnatural death as much lamented & excite as much sympathy as that of the hero or statesman. Oft-times indeed the decease of the philanthropist, through whose generous efforts thousands of beams have been made to beam with joyful emotions, is almost unheeded; and naught remains to tell of his generosity save the occasional sigh, or the solitary tear of grateful affection. But let only the wretch who is weary of the world, and tired of life, who mocks the poor

bugbear death

"Steal out of being when he please
And by what way, whether by hemp or steel!"
And his ^{character now} spotless is at once paraded before the curious
public, his imaginary virtues extolled, his obituary
written, and not unfrequently his funeral oration, in the
form of a sermon, most solemnly pronounced, & he
who while living, had scarce ought to entitle him to
the appellation of man, now dead, is almost canonized
as a saint.

Another cause of this evil is found in our love of
antiquity. Association has thrown such a charm around
ancient heroes and sages, and history has so exalted their
merits when they have fallen by their own hands, that
posterity have lost sight of the enormity of the act, and
applauded the coolness & magnanimity with which it was
executed. Thus the banished Athenian general, for hav-
ing put an end to his earthly career, when ordered by the
Persian King to whom he had fled for protection, to arm him-
self against his fellow countrymen, - is warmly commended.
Lycurgus, it is said was right, when to bind the Spartans
to their oath, he made an end of himself, according to
the historian by abstinence from meat. And what was
end of him, with whose name every thing that is ennobling
in oratory is associated? whose thrilling & soul stirring
words humbled the supercilious, animated the wavering,
and baffled so long the intrigues of the crafty Macedonian?
^{united the disaffected}

Rather than endure the jeers of the proud Antipater, he philosophically eat a poisoned quill, and yielded up his ghost near the altar of Neptune. What have we of Cato, - the sage & philosopher? Having twice read Plato on the immortality of the soul, he sage-like shuffled off this mortal coil with a sword. Otis for having stabbed himself with two daggers is complimented that none ever died like him. And she who was Egypt's boast, its pride its curse, was magnanimous for having died by the sting of an asp, and deprived Caesar of a triumph.

But although the example of the ancients may to some slight extent palliate the crime, it by no means justifies it. Still less so, since the motives which influenced the heathen suicide are incomparably more noble than those that actuate the Christian. The former, sacrificed himself because of his religion. The latter, in defiance of it. Thus, did the Scandinavian immolate himself on the altar reeking with human gore, or ascending ^{the} craggy cliff precipitate himself into the rolling - boiling surge beneath? It was that he might pass gloriously to the paradise of his deified Odin. Does even now the suppliant Brahmin prostrate himself beneath the ponderous wheels of his rolling pagoda? It is from feelings of profound adoration. And does the Hindu widow ascend the funeral pyre of her husband? It is from a firm conviction that it is necessary thus to appease her offended divinity. But what apology offers the Christian suicide? Is it honor? Is it religion? Neither: for the former

if it even sanctioned the crime, would afford but faint consolation to his kindred, and strengthen but feebly their hopes of his disembodied spirit; and the latter is its antipodes, against which its august author has long since declared his invincible sentence.

In fine, if death be not an oblivious sleep, & a future world a wild chimera of the brain, if when men die they still exist & return not to the barren womb of nothing whence first they sprung.

Then must it be an awful thing to die by one's own hand. Our time is fixed and all our days are numbered. How long how short we know not; this we know Duty requires we calmly wait the summons.

Nor dare to stir till heaven shall give permission.

--- To run away

From this world's ills, that at the very worst
Will soon blow o'er thinking to mend ourselves
By boldly venturing on a world unknown,
And plunging headlong in the dark, — 'tis mad
To phrenzy's half so desperate as this."

College June 25th. 1840.

D. Hervey Smith

Commencement Oration of A. Herr Smith, Class of 1840
Transcribed by Allison Schell, April 2008
Edited by Don Sailer, November 2009

Suicide.

Benevolence is the prime attribute of divinity. And degenerate and fallen as is man, it cannot but be gratifying to discover that he still resembles, though 'tis but faintly, the image of his divine original. Hence to moralize and reform, has ever been the generous effort of the humane and benevolent. To arouse the moral energies of man's nature, unfold his sentient being, break down the strong bulwarks of self, and elevate him to that high standard, for which his mental and moral qualities so eminently qualify him, is still their aim. While however this is the aim, it cannot be concealed that many evils are tolerated if not directly countenanced, whose influence is deleterious in the extreme and directly at variance with efforts the most virtuous. The pharos has indeed been reared and lit, to beacon man across the boisterous and heaving ocean of life, but the shoals and sandbars so numerous in his track, are seldom recorded; and naught but the floating of an occasional spar, or the white waving signal of distress from some distant brine washed bark, could inform him of their existence, or make known to him the sad story of their victims.

And among these quicksand evils, noticed so slightly, and yet rendered so dangerous to life's busy voyagers, do we err in reckoning suicide? that against which the Eternal has fixed his cannon.

To trace this custom however to its source and unfold the depravity of that age in which it first originated, would be an undertaking by no means enviable, and 'tis to be

feared would exhibit humanity in no flattering light.

Obscene and barbarous however as is its origin, heathen like as is its nature and much as it savors of an iron age, setting aside as it does the relation of kindred and friends, and invading the sanctity of omnipotent power, it is nevertheless nurtured and cherished in an age boasting loudly of its refinement of taste and its purity of morals. Historians, poets and novelists have not been wanting in every age, and least of all in the present, who could so far disregard the finer feelings of our nature, as to attempt openly and boldly to justify this practice: and perhaps he who would even now venture to oppose it might in the estimation of some hazard his claim to good sense and endanger his reputation for sanity.

The causes of suicides are various and numerous. To exhibit however all or even the greatest part of them would be a fruitless endeavor; for they vary as circumstances vary. Thus it would be exceedingly hazardous to venture an explanation why one so perverts the natural uses of things, as to convert his kerchief into a halter, or his bed post into a gibbet; why another instead of sipping the nectar of the grape, makes a hydraulic pipe of his esophagus and swallows acids by the gallon; or why a third instead of enjoying the ambrosial sweets of life turns his stomach into a laboratory, and sends down minerals and alkalies by the bushel. Each has a reason and modus operandi of his own. Thus the auburn ringlet lover, whose phiz

so curiously overgrown with nature's wild sprouts, would puzzle a zoologist to determine whether it belonged to the genus homo, or to that of the animal ycleped an ape, - because forsooth his mistress does not swear unalterable constancy to him, and adore him as the beau ideal of all manly perfection, boldly revenges the indignity by piercing his jugular, and passing off into happy nonentity. The blue eyed maiden, because peradventure her French gibberish, Italian sonnets, and Parisian habits, will not secure absolute idolatry from the object of her affection, suddenly imagines herself a mermaid, and leaving this vile earth, and its viler lords, delicately immerses into a fish pond. The pitiful miser still grasping his pelf with his "cold skeleton hands", dancing at the gingle of dollars and cents, and bowing before his gold with an idolatry that would disgrace the [veniest?] devotee of Eastern limes, takes advantage of a famine and like one of old, sells a mouse for an exorbitant price, and then starves himself with the money in his pocket. And last though not least, follows the sage philosophic experimenter, who like the pact of Agrigentum, to deify himself, plunges into the crater of a lime-kiln, or like the Frenchman to test the last struggle of nature, - suffocates himself with charcoal and lamp black, and bequeaths to his credulous posterity a heterogeneous sheet, containing an account of his sufferings, with specific directions as to his corpus defunctum.

But although the proximate cause of suicide is

generally known that which we conceive to be one of the ultimate causes, to wit newspaper immortality, is less obvious, though its influence is not the less direct and alarming. The gazettes of the day it is urged would remain unread, were it not for the startling captions of murders, robberies, and suicides with the detailed accounts of which they are constantly teeming; and hence the caterers for the perverted taste of the public size with unwonted avidity upon every morsel that would tend to stimulate this morbid appetite. Conscious of this, the self murderer is sure of his need of fame; and though he may have beggared hapless orphanage and lonely widowhood, ground with an iron hand toiling industry and robbed honesty of its cheering rewards, yea though even vice and crime and blood have marked his course, yet is his unnatural death as much lamented and excites as much sympathy as that of the hero or statesman. Oft-times indeed the decease of the philanthropist, though whose generous efforts thousands of bosoms have been made to heave with joyful emotions, is almost unheeded; and naught remains to tell of his generosity save the occasional sigh, or the solitary tear of grateful affection. But let only the wretch who is weary of the world, and tired of life, who mocks the poor -

bugbear death.

"Steal out of being when he please

And by what way, whether by hemp or steel."

And his character now spotless is at once paraded before the curious public, his imaginary virtues extolled, his obituary written, and not unfrequently his funeral oration, in the form of a sermon, most solemnly pronounced; and he who while living, had scarce aught to entitle him to the appellation of man, now dead, is almost canonized as a saint.

Another cause of this evil is found in our love of antiquity. Association has thrown such a charm around ancient heroes and sages, and history has so exalted their merits when they have fallen by their own hands, that posterity have lost sight of the enormity of the act and applauded the coolness and magnanimity with which it was executed. Thus the banished athenian general, for having put an end to his earthly career, when ordered by the Persian king to whom he has fled

for protection, to arm himself against his fellow countrymen, - is warmly commended. Lycurgus, it is said was right, when to bind the Spartans to their oath, he made an end of himself, according to the historian by abstinence from meat. And what was end of him, with whose name every thing that is enabling in oratory is associated? Whose thrilling and soul stirring words humbled the supercilious, animated the wavering, united the disaffected and baffled so long the intrigues of the crafty Macedonian?

Rather than endure the jeers of the proud Antipater, he philosophically eat a poisoned quill, and yielded up his ghost near the altar of Neptune. What have we of Cato, - the sage and philosopher? Having twice read Plato on the [immortality?] of the soul, he sage-like shuffled off this mortal coil with a sword. Otho for having stabbed himself with two daggers is complimented that none ever died like him. And she who was Egypt's boast, its pride its curse, was magnanimous for having died by the sting of an asp, and deprived Caesar of a triumph.

But although the example of the ancients may to some slight extent palliate the crime, it by no means justifies it. Still less so, since the motives which influenced the heathen suicide are incomparably more noble than those that actuate the Christian. The former, sacrificed himself because of his religion. The latter, in defiance of it. Thus, did the Scandinavian immolate himself on the alter reeking with human gore, or ascending the craggy cliff precipitate himself into the rolling - boiling surge beneath? It was that he might pass gloriously to the paradise of his deified Odin. Does even now the suppliant Brahmin prostrate himself beneath the ponderous wheels of his rolling pagoda? It is from feelings of profound adoration. And does the Hindoo widow ascend the funeral pyre of her husband? It is from a firm conviction that it is necessary thus to appease her offended divinity. But what apology offers the Christian suicide? Is it honor? Is it religion? Neither: for the former

if it even sanctioned the crime, would afford but faint consolation to his kindred, and strengthen but feebly their hopes of his disembodied spirit; and the latter is its antipodes, against which its august author has long since declared his inévocable sentence.

In fine, if death be not an oblivious sleep, and a future world a wild chimera of the brain, if when men die they still exist and return not to the barren womb of nothing whence first they sprung.

“Then must it be an awful thing to die by one's own hand.
Our time is fixed and all our days are numbered
How long how short we know not: this we know
Duty requires we calmly wait the summons.
Nor dare to stir till heaven shall give permission.
..... “To run away
From this world's ills, that at the very worst
Will soon blow o'er thinking to mend ourselves
By boldly venturing on a world unknown,
And plunging headlong into the dark, - 'tis mad
No phrenzy half so desperate as this.”

D. College June 25th, 1840. A Herr Smith