The Power of Sacrifice

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/collegian
Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation
"The Power of Sacrifice." The Collegian 1, no. 4 (1849).
Available at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/collegian/vol1/iss4/5

The Collegian is a literary magazine published by the Belles Lettres and Union Philosophical Societies at Dickinson College in 1849. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
THE POWER OF SACRIFICE.

The silent murmurs of the fireside had now grown to the open remonstrances of the club-room. What at first was whispered in the corner, now had become the topic of every conversation. The flickering spark which hitherto served to give life to the sire's tale, had now fired the popular mind. Everywhere signs of rebellion were evident. The disaffected multitudes could not longer be restrained; but, infuriated by the foulest treatment, nervèd by patriotic recollections, past injuries, and a knowledge of present rights, they broke forth like the swollen torrent. The efforts to suppress them were as ineffectual as placing the hands against the dashing surges. The repeated secret manoeuvres of governmental spies did in the mean time succeed in arresting several noble men.

Days had passed. Low in the damp, dark cell lay incarcerated a lone patriot. Though in this gloomy prison-house he was shut in from the busy scenes above, yet in his visions he was listening to the call of his countrymen and mingling in their councils and battles. Suddenly he is awaked and hurried off. Before a grand array of lords and judges he is condemned and sentenced to death. As the sentence was pronounced he sat motionless: not a muscle moved; but the flashings of his dark eye gave proof of the secret scorn and fiery indignation which burned within. He was immediately remanded to prison. No time must be given to the felon to prepare for death; the occasion demanded speedy sacrifice. The same place which had been lighted up by the blaze of burning martyrs, and had groaned beneath the ponderous tread of religious zealots, was to witness another sacrifice to truth. Ere the morning light had dawned, a vast crowd was assembled, awaiting in anxious suspense the arrival of the patriot. And when he approached the place of execution, seated upon his coffin, it was not amid the wild huzzas of the multitude; no, but everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, death reigned. Not a soul breathed. Man, woman, and child, were as though life had left them, a motionless mass. The sheriff ascended the scaffold, and after him the youthful patriot. No priest, no comforter attended him—he was a traitor. The rope was adjusted to his neck, and the sheriff descended to the ground. The ocean gave signs of life; it moved, it heaved, it raged. The great heart of the people was broken up; the heavens resounded with awful lamentations, and grew black with the dark breathings of revenge. But the felon was hung, the patriot was dead, and Robert Emmet had offered himself a living sacrifice upon the altar of his country. Does any one deny that in this man’s death there was not greater power than in his life? This, then, is the secret of that energy which the name of Robert Emmet never fails to inspire in the breast of every Irishman: He was a sacrifice.

Sacrifice is surrender made for some object. It creates a free power.
The Power of Sacrifice.

the elements arising from the decomposition of matter enter freely into combination and form new bodies, so from sacrifice escape elements pure and unhurt, which distribute themselves and unite readily with other elements. From the blood of the slain victim, from the ashes of the martyr, from the crucifixion of selfishness, that force is derived which is to beat back the powers of darkness, quench the violence of passion, reconcile clashing interests, wrest from men the implements of death, and convert the long-lived enmities of nations into mutual reciprocity and charity. What is the salvation of the world? Jesus Christ, slain from the foundation, a sacrifice for sin. And, to be more specific, how are nations, communities, and society, preserved? “Ye are the salt of the earth.” Ye are the salt who have imbied the spirit of the great sacrifice which teaches you to devote life to the cause of truth and humanity. By your kindness, benevolence, concessions, and uniform meekness, ye impart savor to the masses.

The universality of immolation in all ages proves that the conviction of its necessity and power is coeval with the human race. It has always been used as a means of reconciliation. And it is an astonishing fact, that not only the Jehovah of Jewry is appeased by sacrifice, but the divinities of almost the whole heathen world. There must be some significance in all this. Apart from the specific deduction of Christian theologians, that this fact is a great index pointing to Calvary, we must also conclude from it that the principle of sacrifice is universal and constitutional to man. The offspring of Love, it is the basis of religion and politics, upon which are founded all institutions adapted to elevate human nature. Religion demands the heart of him who embraces it. The preservation of the state requires concessions on the part of the people. Society, for the maintenance of its peace and prosperity, must take from individual hands the right of punishment for injuries received. The right must be vested in a tribunal erected by the public. Were every one to take into his own hands the means of obtaining satisfaction for violence inflicted, there would be no end to retaliation. All barriers would be overrun, and destruction would ensue. The feudal systems which empowered the individual to avenge his own cause in person, devastated the fair plains of Europe, and spread the pall of night over her wasted inhabitants. But witness, in later days, the result of the transfer of this power to society. Agriculture, trade, the professions, commerce, the sciences and arts, are generally prosperous. In our daily observations we are called upon to pause in admiration of the beauty and utility of the workings of this principle. See its early manifestations in children. Innocence and love seek the happiness of all. Notwithstanding the conduct of children is used by writers on moral and mental philosophy to prove the inherent nature of the possessory principle, yet it must be admitted that it gives ground for basing the assertion, that originally a recognition of common interests is the stronger. Let it not be supposed, however, from this observation, that I have any sympathy with modern communism. Here is what I mean: Let self be yielded up for the common good, and, at the same
time, let every man's individuality be preserved. Some time after the American Revolution, the original thirteen States found the bonds of confederation entirely too loose for a perfect and effective general government; and in view of this fact each State voluntarily invested in the *general government* certain powers of which before it had possessed exclusive jurisdiction, and at the same time was careful to retain its own individual sovereignty. The result of these mutual concessions—this sacrifice on the part of the *States*—this concentration of *powers*, was the creation of a great independent *power*, a distinct sovereignty, a consolidated government, which commands the confidence of the people and the respect of the world. Again, a few years ago, we were threatened with disunion on the much agitated question of slavery. Dark and lowering were the clouds which gathered around us. It thundered at no great distance. In that hour of danger, the spirit which framed our constitution and gives it life did not fail us. Behold "the north" and "the south" each surrendering some cherished claim, and compromising! And permit me to say, that the same spirit of sacrifice which has been our conservatism in the past, can alone be our conservatism in the future, all the croakings of ultra anti-slavery men and ultra pro-slavery men to the contrary, notwithstanding. All have in vivid recollection the late London Evangelical Alliance. The crowning glory of the age! The greatest and purest hearts, seized by the Spirit of God, were caught up to a heaven of charity, beyond the vision of short-sighted bigots, and above the low and contracted systems of sects and parties.

Sacrifice is necessary to the attainment of deserved eminence. Is greatness gained? It is by sacrifice. Is it forfeited? It is because the sacrifice is not perfect. Napoleon sacrificed ease, and rose; refused to sacrifice selfish ambition, and fell. Washington sacrificed all, all make him great. The students of Germany for years have been identified with the progress of literature: their lives have been devoted to critical examination and untiring research. Self-denial is the predominant trait of a truly great man. But some who have gained supremacy by self-denial, forgetting that the means of attaining and retaining are the same, plunge into those habits of voluptuousness which work the destruction of all true excellence. How many thus fall and are crushed beneath the mighty superstructure of their own incessant toil!

The man who serves a cause because it is right, is the useful man. When his *conscience* is the reflection of public applause, he rejoices; still, if anathemas are heaped upon him instead of blessings, he stands unmoved. Reward, to him, is not the measure of duty. To conscience his actions are referred. Without doubt he finds it easier to act according to his convictions of duty on the conspicuous theatre, where he is stimulated by popular applause; but still his energy is not lessened in the shade; there, as everywhere, duty is one and the same, inviolable and obligatory. This is the man who converts prisons into palaces, and scaffolds into thrones. With him sacrifice is the basis, glory the crown of life.