

HERBERT SPENCER'S "AUTOBIOGRAPHY."

How far Catholics may be acquainted with Mr. Herbert Spencer's writings I do not know. But every one has heard of agnosticism; the newspapers talk incessantly about evolution; and it seems to be admitted that no previous time was ever less religious or plunged more deeply into the slough of materialism, than the age we live in. Mr. Spencer was at once the advocate and the exponent of a system which, whatever its pretensions, did in no slight degree bring to pass the condition of things from which we are suffering. He flung from him the very thought of Revelation; he transformed God to the Unknowable; he reduced the Moral Law to an instinctive reckoning of utility; and he explained human nature as a problem in physics. Of all the teachers whom Englishmen have looked up to during the past fifty years, he was the most solemn in speech, the least elevated in idea, a dogmatic and peremptory denier of any grounds for action which lay beyond the tomb. In effect, I am bound to say, Mr. Spencer was an atheist, materialist and thanatist—all which words I desire to employ as strictly-measuring science would use them. True it is that, in the last resort, he took refuge with the primal mystery. But while his Unknowable was a name, his crude scheme of material forces was brought out as a fact, and the only one that need give us any concern. By it he accounted for the universe, and by it, in these two immense volumes, he accounts for himself. I believe, however, that the Autobiography will do not a little towards lessening Mr. Spencer's unhappy influence, while it ends in a most remarkable confession, which Christians must register and insist upon. Very strange on the dying lips of such a man is that acknowledgement. Religion, he tells us, can never perish. Its historical forms have still their part to play in civilized society. Attack them, and the sudden changes that you create are sure to be followed by reaction. "There must continue to rise afresh the great questions concerning ourselves and surrounding things," he says at last, "and if not positive answers, then modes of consciousness standing in place of positive answers, must ever remain."

If we translate this Spencerian language, what does it signify? That no one can be an agnostic in the long run. That no state or large association of people can exist without a religion which gives plain answers to the ultimate questions. That there is not anywhere a system which can be substituted with advantage for the Christian teaching. That whenever "lucid intervals" occur in the race for wealth, or the superficial "culture" which now appears as criticism and again as science, "questions of transcendent moment" will clamor for solution. Thus the great "synthetic philosophy" ends in a cry of despair, and it is "no wonder that men take refuge in authoritative dogma." Authority, dogma, tradition—we know, and the world knows, where these are to be sought by Europeans, by Americans, in brief, by all who have looked into the story of the past. The many tomes of Mr. Spencer were intended to satisfy the need of knowledge and of feeling. When we arrive at their closing page, the author is candid enough to allow that they satisfy neither. His life-work ends in a "paralyzing thought" and a "waste universe." If the Church cannot solve this riddle, it is insoluble. Thus the alternative in which Mr. Spencer leaves us is not "Reason or Faith," it is "Faith or Unreason." Could the acknowledgment of defeat be more pathetic?

But what is the explanation? We turn to the early chapters of his biography and see the young Spencer in training under all the curious influences of English Puritanism. His family, settled from old in Derbyshire, was Huguenot or even Hussite in descent, by persuasion Methodist, cut off as completely as possible from Catholic tradition. His father drifted into Quaker meetings; his uncle, the

well-known clergyman, Thomas Spencer, was Low Church. Herbert himself, as a lad, took no interest in the religion of his ancestors, felt that its ways were irksome, and dropped it as soon as he could get a chance. His intellect, though powerful and given to general views, never seems to have kindled beneath poetical or artistic inspirations. His character, in some respects a fine one, was marred by ill-temper, a pragmatic self-sufficiency, and a want of tact, which he owns but could not overcome. He suffered ill-health, brought on by excessive application; and more than half his long life was a struggle, heroic in its quiet perseverance, against the disfavor of men and the strokes of fortune. Only a sudden windfall, twice repeated, and the enthusiastic help of Professor Youmans, the American, enabled him to go on with his literary labors. He declined the titles of honor from great universities. He made no attempt to court popular opinion. He lived a simple and austere life. To his friends he was devoted, and he could be generous in a delicate way which he represented as mere loyalty to his word. In all this we cannot but discern elements of greatness; yet the man's writing is commonplace, his thoughts are singularly prosaic, and we chafe under so dogmatic a tone. In one instance he has yielded to a temptation which he ought to have resisted and laid himself open to rebuke. It is where he gives us to understand that Marian Evans, who was not yet George Eliot, asked him to marry her and met with a refusal. Surely there was no need to publish that on the housetops. On the whole, Mr. Spencer is properly reticent where third persons are concerned. His harsh judgment of Carl le is such as we might expect. That he should fail to comprehend Ruskin turns the light on his own deficiencies. But his admiration for George Eliot's intellect, sincere as it was, will hardly excuse the somewhat fatuous expression which tells us that she was not beautiful enough to captivate his fancy. A little less self-regard and a little more altruism would have become him better.

To sum up. As what he meant it to be, the "natural history" of his opinions, this work will be consulted by Mr. Spencer's friends and critics with advantage. Where it touches on abstract or scientific problems it is constantly luminous and instructive. But as a story it misses fire by want of compression; it abounds in details which do not signify; it is tedious, dull, and curiously depressing. Spencer despised the classics; he would not read history. At every moment we are reminded of his limits. That he should have had so imperfect a sense of religion was certainly his misfortune; but that he should set himself up as a judge over it was something more. The confession of failure which he made at length will not undo his pernicious influences in the earlier days of Darwinism; but it stands on record to warn his future readers that if they follow his "First Principles" the conclusion will be, as already quoted, a paralysis of thought and a "waste universe." To this end of controversy must come, when all is said, on Mr. Spencer's showing, the doctrine of evolution which was put forth in so triumphant a guise by men like Huxley, Clifford, Haeckel, and their ancestors. In refusing the aid of religion they have made not only life, but their own physical science, incomprehensible, a tale without meaning because without purpose. We need never say that science, legitimate in aim and instruments, is bankrupt. But if Mr. Spencer's epilogue has any force, it declares the bankruptcy of his synthetic system.—The Rev. William Barry, D.D., in Catholic Times of Liverpool, Eng.

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The prizes were gems, and the glad hearts of Misses Anna Kavanagh and Kittie W. Bertrand rejoiced over their coveted rewards. Refreshments were served, and the "dear Father" found nesting in the heart of a rose a nice little sum of gold—small, indeed, compared with the store of love and affection embedded in the hearts of his children—but, nevertheless, a testimony of their never-failing love and esteem.

Altogether it was an evening well spent, and as the Rev. Pastor remarked at the end of his profuse word of thanks, "it was the cause that a very good man was in very good company." It is the wish of all that this kind Father may be spared many years to preside over such a family gathering.

Miss R. Birch, the worthy president, who is ever untiring in her zeal and devotedness, is to be congratulated on the success she achieved. Among those present were the Mesdames P. O'Connell, John Kelley, James Kelley, Misses A. Walsh, E. Shaw, D. Hinds, A. Caron, A. Gellely, S. Blurton, M. and J. Riordan, G. Laughman, W. Gellely, A. E. and A. Lauzon, E. Markinski, H. Tobin, M. A. Caze, Alice Kavanagh, M. McDonald, M. Nesbitt, Eva and Viola Corrigan, R. McDonald, Yvonne Picard, A. Malenfant, C. Jones, M. Amyot, Misses Brownrigg, M. Tierney, L. Bertrane, L. Harrington, A. Snow, M. and K. Shannon, Misses Madden, K. Wymbs, F. Tobin, G. Morrison, H. Grant, M. Landers, E. Connell.

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