

HERBERT SPENCER. The Autobiography of a Prodigious Egotist.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. By Herbert Spencer. Illustrated. In two volumes. 8vo, pp. xv, 662; vii, 624. D. Appleton & Co.

The impression left by this voluminous narrative is one of a man of great intellectual powers who took himself too seriously. Herbert Spencer as portrayed by himself would seem to have been an extraordinarily self-absorbed and humorless individual, a man who allowed his high intellectual preoccupations so to react upon his intercourse with human beings as to make his long life an affair of the fewest possible merely natural sensations.

The absence of humor from Spencer's make-up is curiously shown in his failure to see in himself the faults that he sees in others, to apply to his own experience the thoughts produced in him by things outside himself. Take, for example, this very question of detail in biography: "I have seen nothing more of Carlyle's 'Cromwell' than is to be gathered from the reviews," he writes to his friend Lott. "As you correctly surmise, I have no intention of wading through it. If, after a thorough examination of the subject, Carlyle tells us that Cromwell was a sincere man, I reply that I am heartily glad to hear it, and that I am content to take his word for it, not thinking it worth while to investigate all the evidence which has led him to this conclusion."

And every occasion with the sublimest belief in the soundness of his own judgment. When Ruskin published "Modern Painters," Spencer was delighted "to find in him one who dared express unfavorable opinions about some of Raphael's works." He had himself given doubts about Raphael. But presently "The Stones of Venice" appeared. "I opened it," he says, "with raised expectations. On looking at the illustrations, however, and reading the adjacent text, I presently found myself called upon to admire a piece of work which seemed to me sheer barbarism. My faith in Mr. Ruskin's judgment was no further attracted to his writings than was implied by reading portions quoted in reviews or elsewhere." Could Carlyle have been more summary? Another droll instance of his cheerful readiness to dogmatize about matters in a province not his own is supplied in a letter on a musical notion, which he cherished down to the close of his life. Writing to his friend Lott, in 1848, he says:

Above all other operatic composers Meyerbeer is dramatic. He really knows what an opera ought to be. He subordinates everything to the characters, the emotion and the sense, and does not suffer that his music with pretty little songs and duets have no relation to the action. Meyerbeer's opera of his idea not give you the idea of a good thing drawn out thin, as most of them do—and then slightly colored together. I may say that I never was satisfied with an opera till I heard "The Huguenots."

Setting in London as the sub-editor of "The Economist," he led a thoughtful and, it would seem, a happy life, reading, making friends, test-esting the merits of a vegetable diet, and working on his first book, that "System of Social and Political Morality," which he published finally under the title of "Social Statics." In his work he took a long stride toward the fulfillment of his literary and philosophical ambitions, and he met with some appreciation, though not with the public prints as he would have preferred. Twice he writes for us a review of a work of his own such as a competent critic might have been expected to write at the time of its publication. The failure of any oracle to discourse in the right vein seems to have rankled in his mind. He protests that he had no reason to be dissatisfied with the reception given to "Social Statics," if the reception is judged "by the ordinary standards," but he cannot forbear sneering thus at the critic: "The usual purposes of a reviewer are, first, to get his guineas with the least expenditure of labor; second, to show what a clever fellow he is—how much more he knows about the matter than the author; third, to write an amusing article; fourth, to give some account of the book; which last purpose, often practically unattainable, is rarely fulfilled."

Of his "First Principles" he sarcastically observes that "unlike a book of travels, or a gossiping biography, or a volume of court scandal, or a fresh translation of some classical author, or a new account of some bloody campaign, or a new speculation concerning the authorship of 'Juntas,' or a discussion of Queen Mary's amours, it offered no temptation to the writer of reviews in literary journals; and hence, as might have been expected, it was comparatively little noticed," when it first appeared. His fame long since was made secure, but he was never precisely a popular author, and his autobiography forms an almost colorless record of sheer hard work, carried on under the pressure of ill health, and especially under the handicap of night after night of broken sleep. He gained strength and some pleasure from travel in England and on the Continent, and found some comfort, too, in fishing. Now and then he counteracted public neglect, there would come some inspiring token of sympathy from an individual. The tangible tribute paid to him by his American admirers is well remembered. Other examples of generosity toward him he notes with dignified gratitude. Sometimes he derives entertainment from the attitudes of his supporters. When Chapman, the publisher, and George Eliot undertook to choose a wife for him, and he failed to fall in with their plans, he was candid enough to set down the fact that the lady to whom he was introduced was no more favorably impressed with him than he was with her, and pointing out that she may have been disappointed by his substituting commonplace remarks for intellectual discussions, he continues in this wise:

Nor is it only in respect of intellectual manifestations that too much is looked for from authors. There are also looked for, especially from authors of historical books, traits of character greatly transcending ordinary ones. The common anticipation is that they are likely to display qualities of which the world is in need. This remark is suggested, not by anything which occurred in 1851, or thereabout, but by incidents of some thirty years later, of which I am reminded by the incidents narrated above. These, though, I do not remember, I do not, perhaps, better set down here than elsewhere. One concerns a Frenchman, who, anxious to see me, came to the Athenaeum, the billiard room, as the place where, in the afternoon, I was most likely to be found. I there saw me engaged in a game, and heard afterward, lifted up his hands with an exclamation to the effect that he had not seen with his own eyes a man so well equipped with the American millionaire, Mr. Andrew Carnegie, who, in August, 1882, returning to America from the service in which he had spent the right time, is very funny. Thus when Mr. Appleton asked him to sit for a portrait he chose Mr. J. B. Burgess to paint it, for two humbly quaint reasons. "One was that he was not a professed portrait painter; my impression being that he would feel more interest and take more pains than an artist who had made portrait painting his business. The other was that he had shown a remarkable power of rendering expression. A picture of his, entitled 'Bravo Toro,' exhibited in the Royal Academy some years before, and representing spectators at a Spanish bullfight, had greatly struck me by its truthful and varied representation of character and emotion." Only one time could have been played in the studio where the fruit of this extraordinary decision was brought forth, the old one so familiar to our Revolutionary ancestors, known as "The World Turned Upside Down." But he is sanely itself in the explanation he gives of his devotion to billiards:

It suffices for me that I like billiards, and the attainment of the pleasure which I regard as a sufficient end. My aversion to the game is not that it sets my face against that asceticism which makes it an offense to do a thing for the pleasure of doing it. My aversion is that it is a waste of time, as no injury is inflicted on others, nor any ulterior injury on self, and so long as the various duties of life have been discharged, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is perfectly legitimate and requires no apology. The opposite is nothing else than a remote sequence of the old devil worship of the barbarian; who sought to please his god by inflicting pain on himself, and believed his god would be angry if he made him laugh.

Spencer enjoyed the society of charming women. Why did he not seek happiness in married life? Perhaps, with that wonderfully controlled mind of his, he was able coldly to reason himself out of all danger from the opposite sex. "One who devotes himself to grave literature," he says, in the chapter of "Reflections," written four years after he concluded his autobiography in 1880, "must be content to remain celibate; unless, indeed, he obtains a wife having adequate means for both, and is content to put himself in the implied position. Even then, family cares and troubles are likely to prove fatal to the undertaking." He quotes with tact approval the remark made to him by a scientific friend: "Had you married there would have been no system of philosophy." There was never any chance of his making George Eliot his wife. "There were reports that I was in love with her," he states, "and that we were about to be married. But neither of these reports was true." He has a good deal to say about the novelist. She began to write fiction partly from his urging, and there is no doubt that they were much in sympathy, but those two imperious minds

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could never have lived permanently together. She expressed surprise once at seeing no lines on his forehead as the result of his hard thinking. "I suppose it is because I am never puzzled," he said. "Oh! that's the most arrogant thing I ever heard uttered," she exclaimed, and though he proceeded to explain away his seeming arrogance, she was not far wrong in her feeling about him. Spencer's portrait of this famous woman includes the following interesting lines:

In physique there was, perhaps, a trace of that masculinity characterizing her intellect; for though of but ordinary feminine height, she was strongly built. The head, face, and hands, were all in women. It had, moreover, a peculiarity distinguishing it from most heads, whether feminine or masculine; namely, the contour was very regular. Usually, heads have here and there either flat places or slight hollows, but her head was everywhere convex. Striking by its power when in repose, her face was remarkably transfigured by a smile. The smiles of many are signs of nothing more than amusement, but with her smile there was habitually mingled an expression of sympathy, either for the person smiling at or for the person with whom she was conversing. It was a contralto of rather low pitch, and I believe, naturally strong. On this point I have no doubt. For on those days we occasionally sang together, but the habit of subduing her voice was so constant that I suspect its real power could rarely if ever be heard. Its tones were always gentle, and, like the smile, sympathetic.

Her self-control, leading to evenness of temper, was marked. Only once did I see irritation, not unjustified, a little too much manifested. Conscientiousness and just in all relations, and consequently indignant against wrong, she was nevertheless tolerant of human weaknesses as to be quickly forgiving; and her indignation was rarely, if ever, in part caused by constant study of her own defects. She complained of being troubled by double consciousness, a current of self-criticism being an habitual accompaniment of anything she was saying or doing; and this naturally tended toward self-depreciation and self-distrust.

In early days she was, I believe, sometimes vivacious, but she was not when she was in the habit of writing. Probably this was the reason why the wit and the humor which from time to time gave signs of her presence were not frequently displayed. Cultures was an habitual trait. There was never any indication of mental excitement, or of mental strain; but the impression constantly produced was that of latent power—the ideas which came from her being manifestly the products of a large intelligence working easily, of which she must have been conscious, was not accompanied by any marked self-consciousness. Of opinion she frequently expressed in a half-apologetic manner.

It is a pity that there is not more material of this sort in the autobiography, to enliven the rather monotonous stream of inconsequential information. Spencer's life was, on the whole, notably uneventful, and even those themes on which he might have enlarged in an effective manner are often treated with so heavy a hand as to lose much of their significance. When he goes to Switzerland he is disappointed because of the absence of "fine coloring," and he finds the country in this respect "far inferior to Scotland." When he visits America he pays his respects, with due solemnity, to our great institutions of "iced water," but unnumbered British tourists have touched the same subject, and his pages on this country are throughout as dull as that of his least inspired predecessors and followers have written. We would not regret this so much if it were not that the autobiography is so portentously long. When a man fills more than twelve hundred pages with the story of his life he ought at least to make the majority of them readable. The sad truth is that Spencer let his pen wander on when he sat down to the composition of these volumes with altogether too much complacency, and wrote many a page when he had really little, if anything, to say beyond the things with which only the members of his family could be expected to have any concern. Spencerian fanatics will rejoice in the book. Disinterested readers will find in many parts of it nothing but boredom.

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which are bred simply "for the purpose of deciding gambling bets. Better for the nation to play 'national honest games of roulette' than to put its faith in tipsters. So this reformer wants to see 'national roulette rooms' established by the government all over the kingdom. The revenue thus amassed would pay off the national debt, supply every conceivable demand for the army, and give us a useful fund of the 'useless' money which the government all the time does not arise in people who are left to themselves and nature."

The recent publication by Houghton, Mifflin & Co. of Henry G. Pearson's biography of John A. Andrew recalls the fact that to the great War Governor Massachusetts owes the so-called Shoe String Library. The Governor was indefatigable in saving all documents and letters written during the Civil War period, and these are now kept on file at the State House, tied together by a black string, whence the name by which they are familiarly known among the attendants. The second volume of Charles Welsh's "Famous Battles of the Nineteenth Century," just issued by the Weesels Company, covers the period from Waterloo to the opening of the Civil War. The last two volumes of the work will appear in the autumn. Dyce's edition (in eleven volumes) of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher has been out of print for many years, and the new Variorum Edition, planned under the general direction of Mr. A. H. Bullen, is a welcome one. The first volume, which is nearly ready for publication, contains "The Maid's Tragedy" and "Philaster," edited by Mr. P. A. Daniel, and "A King and No King," "The Scornful Lady" and "The Custom of the Country," edited by Mr. R. Warwick Bond. The work will be completed in twelve volumes, and the last volume will contain memoirs, excursions, etc., by the general editor.

We have not to learn at this late date that the literary German does not admire the American woman. The grounds of this disapproval may be traced in Dr. Reich's entertaining paper in "The National Review." In the attitude of the European woman toward the man, he says: "She does, indeed, recognize that he is, from certain points of view of the social economy and of her own, more strongly than it has taken hold of her; her ambition is to win the recognition of her bright intelligence; she likes to pass for a person of energetic nerve, ready at a moment's notice for action of every description. The incessant craving for movement has taken hold of her, and she is not content with the life of the American man. There is probably little exaggeration in saying that the burden of the same passive acceptance which she has taken upon the middle class is in America heaped upon woman upon man. In both cases we meet with the same passive acceptance, ready at a moment's notice for action of every description. The incessant craving for movement has taken hold of her, and she is not content with the life of the American man. There is probably little exaggeration in saying that the burden of the same passive acceptance which she has taken upon the middle class is in America heaped upon woman upon man. In both cases we meet with the same passive acceptance, ready at a moment's notice for action of every description. The incessant craving for movement has taken hold of her, and she is not content with the life of the American man. There is probably little exaggeration in saying that the burden of the same passive acceptance which she has taken upon the middle class is in America heaped upon woman upon man. In both cases we meet with the same passive acceptance, ready at a moment's notice for action of every description. 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