

## Remembering absence: The autobiography and apostasy of Herbert Spencer

---

*Alexis Harley*

I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it. I looked upon the modern exactly as I did upon the ancient religion, as something which in no way concerned me.  
- John Stuart Mill.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter of 1881 to his “American friend,” Herbert Spencer quotes from *The World* an article about a Free Church clergyman, who, compelled to spend a night in Spencer’s vicinity, pronounced him to be the Anti-Christ.<sup>2</sup> As unsolicited sobriquets go, “Anti-Christ” is an inherently negative formulation, both syntactically and semantically.<sup>3</sup> But Spencer not only finds it inoffensive, he even includes the anecdote in his letter to America, and then, twelve years later, transcribes the letter into his autobiography. Negative formulations, it turns out, are Spencer’s speciality. Another such formulation, the word “agnostic,” derives from *agnostos*, Greek for “unknowing.” Spencer is, virtually from the first, an unflinching agnostic, knowingly unknowing:

Memory does not tell me the extent of my divergence from current beliefs. There had not taken place any pronounced rejection of them, but they were slowly losing their hold. Their hold had, indeed, never been very decided: “the creed of Christendom” being evidently alien to my nature, both emotional and intellectual. (I: 151)

Unlike most other autobiographizing casualties of the Victorian crisis of faith (Charles Darwin, Edmund Gosse, Harriet Martineau, John Ruskin, William Hale White, Thomas Henry Huxley, Samuel Butler, John Addington Symonds, George Moore, Thomas Carlyle), Spencer depicts himself (perhaps exaggeratedly) as undergoing no process of de-conversion. He speaks of no God in accounts of his early life (despite being born into a family of Methodist Dissenters), and implies that there is therefore no God for him subsequently to renounce – although he nevertheless engages in lifelong refutations of Christian theism. Nor, equally, is there the acknowledged recollection of a God to delimit the space created by that same God’s absence.

The autobiographies of those mentioned above are for the most part hung on self-interpretive frameworks which have been prefabricated and assembled through their authors’ respective practices of Christianity. When these authors

strip those frameworks of God, they have to cover them up with something else: Romanticism in Gosse's case, evolutionary theory in Darwin's, Comtean positivism in Martineau's; but for all the covering up, the frameworks are still obviously constructed by an erstwhile faith. Spencer's political philosophy is ideologically rooted in Calvinist individualism. His sense of a moral imperative not to believe that for which there is insufficient evidence probably derives from the evangelical demand (as Charles Taylor puts it) to "make up our own minds on the evidence without bowing to any authority."<sup>4</sup> But neither Christian faith nor biblical language has a place in his autobiography. Unlike Darwin, who borrows biblical motifs to illustrate the contra-biblical theory of evolution (or, perhaps, who cannot scrub away the biblical residue of his abandoned Christianity), Spencer, for one of the most diversely erudite thinkers of nineteenth-century England, produces a writing ostentatiously starved for biblical allusion. On the rare occasions when he does borrow from Scripture, the loans are often prodigiously mishandled, reflecting Spencer's comparative unfamiliarity with the Bible. Although Spencer repeatedly speaks of his disbelief, and although he repeatedly foregrounds God's absence, his writing suggests no sense of a personal need for something to fill the vacancy that is not God.

Spencer's three-sentence articulation of his uneventful divergence from "the creed of Christendom" is positively lacking in positive assertion. Firstly, his memory *does not tell* him how far he diverged in his childhood from popular religion. Secondly, he says, *there had not taken place* an obvious act of renunciation. Thirdly, whatever hold current religious beliefs might have had over him (which they were now, in any case, losing), had *never been very decided*. Apart from the final syntactically positive statement - regarding "the creed of Christendom" being evidently alien to my nature" - the rest are grammatically, and semantically, negative. There is no God in Herbert Spencer's consciousness to begin with. There is no point at which the God who is not there is removed. There is no God in his life now. God is an absence in, rather than from, Spencer's life; an absence that Spencer accepts as irredeemable.

It is for this reason that absence is so thematised in his work. What follows will examine how absence operates in Spencer's autobiography, its role in his life, and the rhetorical stratagems that signal the dilemma of a present absence, a densely furnished lexicon of negativity and the liberal use of such figurations (as litotes and antiphrasis) that confound positive meaning with negative form.

Spencer makes no effort to conceal the fact that his creed is predicated on acts of negation. He writes:

The test by which, in the last resort, I determine whether a belief is one I must perforce accept, is that of trying whether it is possible to reject it -

whether it is possible to conceive its negation. In other words, the inconceivability of its negation is my ultimate criterion of a certainty. ... for acceptance of every step in a process of reasoning, the warrant is that negation of it is inconceivable. (I: 417-418)

Spencer's reasoning relies on the algebraically true premise that the multiplication of two negatives - "inconceivability" and "negation" - will produce the positive of "a certainty." His predisposition is for disbelief. He will go, he says, to "the last resort" to avoid a belief; and, if that last resort fails him, he "must perforce accept" the belief in question, not from a credulous desire to do so, but, as the words "must" and "perforce" suggest, of necessity. Spencer asserts, in effect, that he will not believe unless he cannot not believe. There is an epistemological morality behind all this, which Charles Taylor describes, after William Clifford, as an "ethics of belief": a Victorian notion that one "ought not to believe what one has insufficient evidence for."<sup>5</sup> Harriet Martineau, for one, writes more explicitly than Spencer of the moral vision powering her atheism; thus she shows more clearly how that atheism makes a compelling moral alternative to Christianity. But Spencer promotes the practical apparatus for codifying, as Taylor says, "what one has good reason to give credence to and what goes beyond this limit."<sup>6</sup> Scientific method - expounded by Spencer in *On Education* (1861) and employed in his sociological writing - systematises the ethic of unbelief.

The logic of unbelief can be seen in Spencer's recognition of the difference between not believing a proposition to be true and believing a proposition not to be true. In a letter to his father, Spencer reveals that in the absence of any knowledge of God, he is precluded even from making a positive statement about God's non-existence:

I still hold that the question is one about which no positive conclusion can be come to. I hold that we are as utterly incompetent to understand the ultimate nature of things, or origin of them, as the deaf man is to understand sound or the blind man light. My position is simply that I know nothing about it, and never can know anything about it, and must be content in my ignorance. I deny nothing and I affirm nothing, and to any one who says that the current theory *is not* true I say just as I say to those who assert its truth - you have no evidence. Either alternative leaves us in inextricable difficulties. An *uncaused* Deity is just as inconceivable as an *uncaused* Universe. If the existence of matter from all eternity is incomprehensible, the creation of matter out of nothing is equally incomprehensible. Thus finding that either attempt to conceive the origin of things is futile, I am content to leave the question unsettled as the *insoluble mystery*. (I: 346)

While not prepared to come to a negative conclusion, Spencer nevertheless is certain that "no positive conclusion can be come to", that, while he can "deny nothing," he must also "affirm nothing." With a series of similes suggesting

sensory hiatus – where the deaf person cannot understand sound, and the blind person, light – Spencer claims that “we are ... utterly incompetent to understand the ultimate nature of things, or origin of them.” In this case, it is the verb of which “we” is the subject (“are ... incompetent”) that contains the negative prefix, *in-*, whereas a sentence later, when Spencer writes “I know nothing about it”, the verb of which “I” is the subject, “know”, is a semantically and formally positive one, and it is the object, “nothing,” which is semantically negative. The attribution of negativity wavers between the verb with its subject and the verb’s object. The grammatical effect is equivalent to a confusion between “I do not believe this to be” and “I believe this not to be.” Although Spencer disclaims such a confusion, he nevertheless propagates it through variously positioning his negating words and particles.

After a paragraph sown with negatively prefixed words – “incompetent,” “inextricable,” “uncaused,” “inconceivable,” “incomprehensible,” “unsettled” – Spencer’s conclusion that he will leave the question of God’s existence “as the *insoluble mystery*” seems perfectly consistent. As a definition of the question of God’s existence, “the insoluble mystery” resembles the attempts made by apophatic (or negative) theologians to demarcate God’s identity. Apophatic theology defines God through acts of negation, all intended to signal an inadequate human comprehension of God’s sublimity or God’s transcendence of ordinary human language. He is immortal, invisible, ineffable, unknowable. Although practiced by theists from the fifth century’s Pseudo-Dionysius on, apophatic theology finds particular favour with deconstructionists. Derrida writes:

Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor of that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it *has nothing in common*, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. ... Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God’s name opening up the very space of this enigma. ... God would be not merely the end, but the origin of this work of the negative. Not only would atheism not be the truth of negative theology; rather, God would be the truth of all negativity. One would thus arrive at a kind of proof of God – not a proof of the *existence* of God, but a proof of God *by His effects*, or more precisely a proof of what one calls God, or of the name of God, by effects without cause, by the *without cause*.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida expresses here the conundrum Spencer faces in surveying the question of God’s existence. For all Spencer’s negations of the claim that *God is*, he is not led to the conclusion that *God is not*. While he cannot conceive of an “uncaused Deity,” neither can he conceive of an “uncaused Universe.” And so while he objects to the uncaused Deity’s being cited as the Universe’s cause, the idea of a Universe without a cause is unpalatable. Derrida’s conception of the

"without cause" attains Spencer's ideal of the inconceivable. Rather, God is, for Spencer, the vexing phenomenon, the *insoluble mystery*, which arises when negation is not inconceivable but all the conceivable negations could themselves be conceivably negated. Were Spencer to call himself an *atheist*, the negating prefix, *a-*, would attach to the object of belief (or disbelief): the *theos*, God. The atheist's claim is "I know that God is not (*a-theos*)." But instead Spencer calls himself an agnostic, in which case the *a-* attaches to *gnostos*, a participle agreeing with the subject of the act of (dis)believing, "I." Spencer's claim is an autobiographical one, in effect, "I am unknowing (*agnostos*) whether God is or is not."

Derrida's notion that every negative utterance is an affirmation of God as the Unknowable, Ineffable, Invisible, Immortal, and Incontainable, finds a correlative in Spencer's autobiography. Spencer's God is the phenomenon occurring in the statement 'I do not know if X is or is not': the Unknowable. This phenomenon, wherein a statement of negation contains positive components (and, vice versa, wherein a statement of affirmation entails negative components) is repeatedly enacted in the utterances Spencer makes - and does not make - in his autobiography.

The most relevant of these utterances are those pertaining directly to the question of God's existence. When Spencer writes of his emergent "dim consciousness" that God might not be God, he writes in terms of negation, in terms of what is not:

Criticism had not yet shown me how astonishing is the supposition that the Cause from which have arisen thirty millions of Suns with their attendant planets, took the form of a man, and made a bargain with Abraham to give him territory in return for allegiance. I had not at that time repudiated the notion of a deity who is pleased with the singing of his praises, and angry with the infinitesimal beings he has made when they fail to tell him perpetually of his greatness. It had not become manifest to me how absolutely and immeasurably unjust it would be that for Adam's disobedience (which might have caused a harsh man to discharge his servant), all Adam's guiltless descendants should be damned, with the exception of a relatively few who accepted the "plan of salvation," which the immense majority never heard of. Nor had I in those days perceived the astounding nature of the creed which offers for profoundest worship, a being who calmly looks on while myriads of his creatures are suffering eternal torments. But, though no definite propositions of this kind had arisen in me, it is probable that the dim consciousness out of which they eventually emerged, produced alienation from the established beliefs and observances. (I: 152)

This period of insensibility to the astounding, unjust, improbably anthropomorphic nature of "the Cause" is located in the sealed file of Spencer's past. In fact, Spencer goes to considerable lengths to show that this past is past indeed. His use of the pluperfect tense (formed in English with the auxiliary

“had” and a past participle, as in “had ... shown,” “had ... repudiated,” “had arisen,” and employed to indicate an act which has been supremely accomplished), and the temporally deictic markers of “at that time” and “yet,” do not leave the slimmest aperture through which this moment before his repudiation of God might leak into the present. Whatever existed at *that* time decidedly does not exist at the time of writing. But what it is that existed at that time is illustrated as a state of mind Spencer had *not* attained. Then there was “not,” and now there is not “then.” “Criticism had not yet shown” Spencer the astonishment of a cosmic author who deals with humans; he “had not at that time repudiated the notion of a deity” concerned with human relationships; it “had not become manifest” to Spencer how unjust was the penalty for Adam’s disobedience; “nor had [he] in those days perceived the astounding nature” of a creed which encourages the worship of someone ultimately indifferent to his creation’s eternal suffering. Clearly what existed then was an absence of recognition of the nature of God, and what exists now is the absence of that absence of recognition. Lest it seem that this transition represents anything like a de-conversion (and thus confuses Spencer’s own claim that he undergoes none), it should be noted that “though no definite propositions of this kind had arisen,” Spencer thinks a pre-existing “dim consciousness out of which they eventually emerged” probable. The negating propositions always exist; it is just that they do so *dimly*, their amorphous quality compounded by the confusing play of contradiction.

This play is also at work in the passage’s depiction of God as an inherently ironic figure. The traditional semantic function of irony opposes intended with stated meanings.<sup>8</sup> It is in this antiphrastic capacity, going about the business of semantic inversion, that irony reproduces the confusion between the positive and negative, the present and absent. On the one hand, Spencer refers to God as “the Cause from which have arisen thirty millions of Suns with their attendant planets.” The initial capital and definite article in “the Cause” suggest a singular and transcendental force. Referring back to the Cause with the neuter form of the relative pronoun, “which,”<sup>9</sup> deprives the Cause of possible personhood. The “thirty millions of Suns” ascribed to the Cause evoke two paragons of impersonal purity – the unfathomable number and the unattainable astronomical body – in order to render the Cause even more distant from humanity and the everyday. Having done all this, Spencer then speaks of the same entity engaged in the most mundane, human, mortally imperfect of activities. The Cause takes “the form of a man” (whereupon he abandons neuter pronouns and becomes a he); makes with Abraham an unjust contract; seems vain, insecure, petty and pettish, “angry with the infinitesimal beings he has made when they fail to tell him perpetually of his greatness.” Spencer is none too subtle in his irony. When he offers in this passage

a representation of God – in which “the Cause” is impersonal, transcendent, ubiquitous, omnipotent – Spencer chooses not to trust his encoded intent to his decoders’ uncertain capacity for recognition. Instead, he follows up the initial ironic statement about God, as the Cause, with its contrary: that the God of the Bible is jealous, trivial, and human. While an irony’s negative (that is, the literal meaning’s opposite) is usually left to the inferential power of the decoder, in Spencer’s discussion of God, the statement and its negation lie side by side on the page. God is as much (or as little) impersonal abstraction as he is pusillanimous human. Either way, the positive statement about God is negated even as Spencer writes.

The most obvious of the rhetorical figurations Spencer uses to elucidate the operation of negativity is litotes, where a negated antonym is used either for understatement or emphatic confirmation.<sup>10</sup> This denial of a contrary, rather than affirmation of a positive, mimics the position Spencer inhabits *vis à vis* the existence of God. While the subjects Spencer frames in litotes verge often on the trivial, the frequency with which he employs this figuration proclaims its mimetic significance. Of his uncle (a clergyman), Spencer writes “he was not without originality of thought” (I: 101). Of “S.,” his Irish schoolfellow, he says, “his knowledge and ability were not such as made me feel my inferiority” (I: 102). He evokes the common litotic expression, “I have no doubt” (I: 105). The London Zoological Gardens he describes as a sight “at that time not ordinary” (I: 106). Spencer’s father estimates “highly his profession as one inferior to few in order of natural rank” (I: 121). The brown of Spencer’s frock coat is “a colour at that time not uncommonly worn” (I: 142). The criticisms he “so unwisely made were commonly not without good cause” (I: 144). He speaks of lives that “were not trying or unpleasant” (I: 145), and later of how “life in those days was passing not unpleasantly” (II: 19); of the superintendence on the Worcester engineering project which “was not rigid” (I: 141); and of stories that were “not of an improving kind, now with glances down on the passers-by, especially the females, and resulting remarks” (I: 141). He finds a paragraph which “may not unfitly be quoted” (I: 182), and reflects of his overseers’ railway-laying, “it seems not improbable that inadequate regard for precedent might have entailed compromising mistakes” (I: 299). Spencer describes how:

during the growth of a seed into a plant, or an ovum into an adult animal, there takes place a metamorphosis no less complicated and no less marvellous than the metamorphoses which the development hypothesis supposes to have taken place in successive generations of organisms during millions of years. (I: 387)

He writes of living conditions which “made my daily existence a not undesirable one” (I: 424); of how, “In respect of punctuality, printers are not more

praiseworthy than other men of business" (II: 330). While this catalogue could swell further still, it is sufficient to show that Spencer's work boasts an embarrassment of litotes. For some instances there is a contextual occasion. When Spencer claims of S. that "his knowledge and ability were not such as made me feel my inferiority" (I: 102), the understatement is necessary in order to mitigate accusations of arrogance certain to accrue had Spencer forthrightly asserted his feeling of superiority rather than his lack of a feeling of inferiority. But for many there is no local justification, no contextual demand for the negative formulation of a positive statement. The recurrence of litotes in Spencer's writing demonstrates a syntactical enactment of the problem of God, where the act of negating does not produce a denial and the repositioning of a negative particle can reconfigure 'I do not believe X' into 'I believe not-X.'

The question of God's existence confuses the principles of negation. Just as this confusion can be instantiated in utterance, so Spencer's more general preoccupation with God's absence can be embodied (or disembodied) through the absences that riddle autobiographical narrative. Spencer acknowledges that: "A biographer, or autobiographer, is obliged to omit from his narrative the common-places of daily life, and to limit himself almost exclusively to salient events, actions, and traits" (II: 327). The reason for this obligation, he suggests, is purely pragmatic: in the absence of omissions, the "writing and the reading of the bulky volumes otherwise required, would be alike impossible." This from the author whose autobiography spans two volumes, each of some five-hundred pages; who seems, already, autobiographically incontinent. Spencer publicly laments "leaving out the humdrum part of the life," "that immensely larger part which it had in common with other lives." The omission of "the humdrum part of the life" – an omission which Spencer calls a "defect" – produces an impression of the autobiographical subject's life as unrelievedly remarkable, differing "from other lives more than it really did" (II: 327). The absence speaks, but in doing so, it lies. Blanks in Spencer's epistolary record, on the other hand, signal the humdrum events that have conduced to the absence of letters. Spencer writes:

Letters dating fifty odd years back, enabled me to give to the last chapter a much more graphic character than memory alone would have enabled me to give it. In describing the year and a half which now follows, correspondence gives me but little aid. As I was at home throughout this interval, the occasions for reference to me in the communications between Hinton and Derby were comparatively few. Such incidents only as I can recollect must fill the space. (I: 119)

The fewer letters from this period mean that it is given a less "graphic character" in the autobiography. The reason why there are fewer letters is that Spencer spends the period in question at home with his parents. For purely

practical reasons, the flow of letters falls off, but the absence of letters – and the resultant gap in the autobiography – is in part also a comment on the nature of the domestic realm, the private enclosed space, which neither admits nor emits utterance.

In apologising for the blanks in his writing, dispensing with them through the mere act of acknowledgment, Spencer shows his talent for the evasion of absence. In fact, it seems that autobiography's principal task is to evade the absence *par excellence*: to omit the death of the autobiographer. One must be alive to write. So while death might impend over an autobiography, insomuch as that autobiography is a factual work grounded in the events of its author's life, written, of course, by its living author, it is obliged to omit the account of its author's death. There is always something in the author's life which exists beyond the autobiography; the moment beyond the moment the author stops writing; the author's eventual death. To defer that post-autobiographical moment, and so to defer the moment of death, all that is required is that one keep writing. Spencer's autobiographical deferral, for more than one thousand pages, seems positively death defying. But if the writing of the autobiography is an act of death-defiance, so is Spencer's publication strategy (in which, incidentally, he follows Harriet Martineau and John Stuart Mill). He died in 1903. His autobiography was published in 1904. This posthumous publication sees the text end with a Spencer still writing in the first person and still in the present tense about his life. No one is able to read the autobiography until its author is dead. For every one of the autobiography's readers, the death of Herbert Spencer has actually occurred, but is not permitted a presence in the text. It is necessarily and, for the first readers commemorating the anniversary of Spencer's death, no doubt glaringly, absent, at the same time as his death has rendered *him* absent from the world outside his autobiography.

Spencer's autobiography is not just a flight from its author's own death. Spencer does his best to avoid the deaths of others. His autobiography proclaims his distaste for the event that celebrates this most ubiquitous of absences, but also records the humanitarian exception he makes for the funeral of George Eliot's lover, George Henry Lewes:

As my beliefs are at variance with those expressed in burial-services, I do not like attending funerals, and giving a kind of tacit adhesion to all that is said. But I am compelled to make exceptions, and made one towards the close of this year; partly because my absence would have been generally misinterpreted, and partly because it might have given pain to one whose feelings I should have been very reluctant to hurt, though probably she would have understood my motive. The funeral I refer to was that of my friend Lewes, which occurred on the 4th of December [1878]. (II: 318)

Here Spencer makes clear that his aversion to funerals is grounded in an aversion to the beliefs expressed at them. The Victorian burial service that finds ways of paraphrasing the absence of a person's life does so by drawing attention to the presence of God. God exists for Spencer only in the contradictions of negation, only in the absurdity of an absence demanding to be present. In the same way, death is the nothing made thing, the presence of absence, and it is no surprise that Victorian discourses surrounding death invoke God by way of explanation.

Even outside the English funerary tradition, Spencer is acutely aware of the interplay between death and religion – and, indeed, as Christopher Herbert argues, between death and all human culture. Of his mother's last days, Spencer writes: "It was pathetic to see how, when there was no longer the power to discharge domestic duties and religious observances, these constantly occupied the mind" (II: 149). Spencer's mother's loss of power, which is a premonition of her loss of life, impels religious observances to set up a constant occupation, to assert their presence, in her mind. Spencer writes of Egypt that it seemed "the land of decay and death – dead men, dead races, dead creeds" (II: 341). The connection between death, on the one hand, and the extinct creeds, on the other, is made concrete in the tombs, which are a symbol of both, carrying "on a cult that grievously subordinated the living to the dead" (II: 341). Christopher Herbert notes that death is central to Spencer's theory of culture:

The process in social evolution by which traditional customs gradually become codified into laws means that life in the present is in fact secretly dictated by past generations, says Spencer: "the political head becomes still more clearly an agent through whom the feelings of the dead control the actions of the living" (*Principles* 2: 323). Life in society is in effect – almost in fact – pervaded by vampire like spirits exercising their power over the living "by transmitting their natures, bodily and mental" (*Principles* 2: 514).<sup>11</sup>

As Herbert goes on to show, alongside the argument that social relations "take the form of imagery of uncanny transmissions" runs Spencer's contention that religion "originates in the superstitious belief that the dead leave behind ghosts who demand propitiation." Spencer's own development hypothesis – an application of evolutionary theory to human culture and society – implies that the values, the collective feeling, the opinions and the desires of any modern community evolve from, and are thus to an extent prescribed by, the dead. A radical individualist, Spencer was opposed to anything that interrupts the struggle for survival, anything, that is, which stultifies social evolution. The main agent of this stultification is legislation, and, as Spencer claims in *Principles of Sociology*, laws are "dictated by past generations." Law, customs, collective values and opinions, then, subordinate the living to the dead as much as the Egyptian

pyramids do, perhaps not so grievously. That Spencer should largely eschew the dead in his autobiography (as he does in his scientific writing, too, with very few references to his intellectual antecedents) perhaps reflects his general reluctance to privilege the absent over the present.

Periodic and largely futile attempts to cordon off autobiography from fiction have profited from the idea that autobiography draws its narratives exclusively from memory, and fiction from a process of active creation. While this is a contrived distinction (there is something actively creative both in remembering and in the exposition of memory), nevertheless the fallibility of memory, the absences it contains, and the way an autobiographer responds to such absences again foreground absence. In writing his autobiography, Spencer is repeatedly arrested by the discovery of documents, mostly letters, which bring to the level of consciousness the deficiency of memory. One such occasion begins: "A blank which occurs here, alike in my memory and in records, extends to January 14, 1867; at which date I find that I sent to my American friend a letter containing the following passage." Here follows the passage, which regards several universities' seeking Spencer's candidacy for various professorships and for the Senate of London University. He adds:

This extract yields me conclusive proof that in respect even of interesting occurrences, my memory has in some cases failed me utterly. In the absence of the above passage I should have been not simply unconscious that I had ever been asked to become a candidate for a professorship, but should not have believed it had it been alleged. (II: 147)

He notes, finally, that the offer of a seat on the London University Senate – the only of these numerous positions he considered accepting – "came to nothing." The commentary surrounding Spencer's quotation of the letter is considerably less interested in the letter's contents (prospective university appointments which never eventuate), than in the letter as a memento of the gap in Spencer's memory. The emphatic absence of memory attains its own presence in the autobiography, and, conversely, it is the presence of the letter which brings to light the absence of a memory. George Landow writes that Spencer's repeated professions of memory loss make it "increasingly obvious that he realizes and is willing to admit that whole sections of his life have been lost to him."<sup>12</sup> But in contrast to this loss is an emphatic textual repletion, the hundreds of pages of letters that testify to the Unmemorable.

Spencer's silences are often as emotionally disclosive – or more so – than his utterances. On the 6th May, 1845, Spencer receives a letter from his friend "E. A. B\_\_\_" (the ellipsis of whose name is itself a communicative absence) breaking off their friendship for religious reasons. After a heart-rending profession of his

regard for Herbert Spencer, "E. A. B\_\_\_" explains that he is induced to terminate the association because of subjects which:

involve everything in our existence of more than momentary interest; our principles and practice, hopes and fears, our happiness or misery here and hereafter. Such matters are of no light moment, and it seems to me that no two persons holding so very different views as you and I do upon such vital points can remain friends to each other. Did I think that there were the remotest chance of anything that I could urge by way of argument or persuasion I should feel that I was bound to leave no means untried to endeavour to bring you to a true view of the truths of religion, but I know so well that no argument on such a subject ever yet convinced one who has closed his ears to everything but human reason, that I feel it would be utterly useless; and the only likely consequence that could ensue would be to shake the belief that I feel so very strongly the truth of. (I: 276)

The letter's writer is himself, like Spencer, an aficionado of litotes, speaking of a "more than momentary interest," "matters ... of no light moment," and "no means untried," phrases which allow positive assertion and pre-emptive negation to coalesce; a coalescence resulting from the struggle of having, and not wanting, to sever an alliance. Spencer sends the letter on to his friend Lott, saying that "there was much to be admired in its sincerity, if not in its liberality." There is one more paragraph about further meetings, but not a word indicating Spencer's feelings on the subject. He adds, "While one friend was lost, others were gained" (I: 277), as if the absence of one friend directly generates the presence of others. But there is no word of anger, mourning, hurt, regret, or admiration at his friend's self-sacrifice, understanding, or incomprehension. That absence exists not only in the letter of the young Spencer to his friend Lott, but adheres even in the account of the older autobiographer. This silence speaks. The loss of a friend, which Spencer could lay at the feet either of his own vehement agnosticism or of Christianity, instead joins the ranks of the other imponderable subjects confronting him. Similarly, when he finally falls silent on the subject of his lengthily bemoaned celibacy, the silence is pregnant with his dissatisfaction.

On the primary of Spencer's imponderables - the question of the existence of God - he is conspicuously silent in correspondence with his father. He writes of his time in Worcester, in 1840, aged twenty:

My father's letters written during this period from time to time called my attention to religious questions and appealed to religious feelings - seeking for some response. So far as I can remember they met with none, simply from inability to say anything which would be satisfactory to him, without being insincere. (I:150)

This recollection suggests a most communicative silence. Spencer remembers giving no response to his father's religious appeals, but the absence of a response is response enough, and, while more ambiguous than the unsatisfactory but

sincere “anything” Spencer says he was not able to speak, silence is just as telling a negative to his father’s inquiries. The “inability” to speak, “without being insincere,” heaps negation upon negation. But the real confusion of the negative in this passage comes with Spencer’s response to the question of God – a response which he calls here “none” – and which is in fact a further affirmation of God (or the problem he poses) as the “insoluble mystery,” the unspeakable and the indefinable.

Spencer’s predisposition for apostasy is demonstrated in his intolerance of, not only religious, but secular orthodoxies. The deficiencies in Spencer’s heterodox education are of no concern to him. Its absences are merely absences, not (although he does draw attention to them) actively absent. Spencer says of that education: “there should be noted other large omissions, as well as considerable additions, which gave to my education a character unlike that of the ordinary education” (I: p. vii). While he is at pains to assert the absences from his educational experience, he constantly underlines the fact that this education is nevertheless complete. Just as he claims not to feel the lack of his godlessness, nor does he worry that, at the age of thirteen, his Latin and Greek are primitive, his English grammar nonexistent, his arithmetic ordinary; he possesses otherwise no knowledge of mathematics, no English history, no ancient history, no translation of ancient literature, no biography. He does not worry because, “Concerning things around, ... and their properties, I knew a good deal more than is known by most boys.” He enumerates a host of insights into matters zoological, physical, chemical, mechanical, medical, anatomical, and physiological. And concludes, “Such were the acquisitions which formed a set-off against the ignorance of those things commonly learned by boys.” (I: 89)

The idea of a “set-off,” regarding God now, rather than Latin and chemistry, seems more in keeping with the apostasy of Darwin, Gosse and Martineau (who directly substitute one way of thinking with another, and allow for discursive slippage in the process) than with that which I have ascribed to Spencer. Spencer does not, like them, abhor an epistemological vacuum. Towards his autobiography’s conclusion, however, he acknowledges the unpalatability, for most, of insoluble mysteries; that if you take God away, there remains in people’s lives a gaping vulnerable blank. He undergoes a “change of feeling towards religious creeds and their sustaining institutions,” which results:

from a deepening conviction that the sphere occupied by them can never become an unfilled sphere, but that there must continue to arise afresh the great questions concerning ourselves and surrounding things; and that, if not positive answers, then modes of consciousness standing in place of positive answers, must ever remain. (II: 469)

This unfilled unfillable sphere, constantly demanding its fill, forms the basis of the autobiography's final pages. The third last paragraph of the autobiography is an unanswered catechism:

Whence this process, inconceivable however symbolized, by which alike the monad and the man build themselves up into their respective structures? What must we say of the life, minute, multitudinous, degraded, which, covering the ocean-floor, occupies by far the larger part of the Earth's area; and which yet, growing and decaying in utter darkness, presents hundreds of species of a single type? Or, when we think of the myriads of years of the Earth's past, during which have arisen and passed away low forms of creatures, small and great, which, murdering and being murdered, have gradually evolved, how shall we answer the question - To what end? Ascending to wider problems, in which way are we to interpret the lifelessness of the greater celestial masses - the giant planets and the Sun; in proportion to which the habitable planets are mere nothings? If we pass from these relatively near bodies to the thirty millions of remote suns and solar systems, where shall we find a reason for all this apparently unconscious existence, infinite in amount compared with the existence which is conscious - a waste Universe as it seems? Then behind these mysteries lies the all-embracing mystery - whence this universal transformation which has gone on unceasingly throughout a past eternity and will go on unceasingly throughout a future eternity? And along with this rises the paralyzing thought - what if, of all that is thus incomprehensible to us, there exists no comprehension anywhere? No wonder that men take refuge in authoritative dogma! (II: 470)

The questions are catalogued in a movement from the ridiculous to the sublime, from microbiotic marine life to suns and solar systems, reflecting, in fact, one of evolutionary theory's great endeavours, to collapse such oppositions as "ridiculous" and "sublime," to find a kind of sublime in the microbiotic growth and decay at work in the darkness of the ocean-floor. This multi-dimensional journey - "ascending to wider problems" - allows height and breadth to be traversed at once and invites an exploration of the "all-embracing mystery" which manages to effect its embrace from *behind* the lesser mysteries. The questioner, like the questions, begins to transcend the impediments of earthly physical dimensions - becomes, in fact, almost as metaphysical as the mystery itself. Spencer's next paragraph explicitly addresses the possibility of our omnipresence:

So it is, too, with our own natures. No less inscrutable is this complex consciousness which has slowly evolved out of infantine vacuity - consciousness which, in other shapes, is manifested by animate beings at large - consciousness which, during the development of every creature, makes its appearance out of what seems unconscious matter; suggesting the thought that consciousness in some rudimentary form is omnipresent. Lastly come the insoluble questions about our own fate: the evidence seeming so strong that the relations of mind and nervous structure are such that cessation of the one accompanies dissolution of the other, while, simultaneously, comes the thought, so strange and so difficult to realize, that with death there lapses

both the consciousness of existence and the consciousness of having existed.  
(II: 470–471)

The vexed relationship between matter and consciousness drives Spencer into an impossible position of ravelling and unravelling the metaphysical and the physical. Human consciousness becomes “inscrutable,” like the God of apophatic theology. The origins of consciousness are “infantine,” unable to speak, as opposed to God’s being ineffable, unable to be spoken of. The question of God’s existence becomes the question of our own existence, unconsciousness of one’s own existence leaving the self in an approximately equivalent state to that in which the consciousness of another’s non-existence leaves the other.

Spencer concludes, then, with a non-biblical olive branch held out to the metaphysicians:

Thus religious creeds, which in one way or other occupy the sphere that rational interpretation seeks to occupy and fails, and fails the more the more it seeks, I have come to regard with a sympathy based on community of need: feeling that dissent from them results from inability to accept the solutions offered, joined with the wish that solutions could be found. (II: 471)

And here he puts in block capitals: THE END. The words signal an absence that is made violently present.

*Alexis Harley is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Sydney. She has recently submitted a thesis on the autobiographies of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau and Edmund Gosse.*

---

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (1873; New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 30.

<sup>2</sup> The letter is addressed to Edward Youmans, who was instrumental in promulgating Spencer in America. The establishment briefly inhabited by the “Anti-Christ” was at Braemar, where the Free Church clergyman in question “convened a prayer-meeting in the billiard room as a fumigatory measure.” See Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: William and Norgate, 1904), I: 371. Further references parenthesised within the text.

<sup>3</sup> See Maria Hoffman, whose *Negatio Contrarii: a study of Latin litotes* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987) distinguishes between two types of negative form - “morphological negativity” (where a word contains a negative prefix) and “syntactic negativity” (where the expression contains a negation particle) - as well as between negative form and negative meaning (which occurs where an expression “denotes an entity, property, or state of affairs that is generally considered to be bad or undesirable”), 9. Importantly, this model allows for positive meaning conveyed within the presence of negative form.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the making of modern identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 404.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 404. See also William K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief* (1877), in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Watts, 1947).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 405.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: denials” (“Comment ne pas parler: dénégations”, 1987), trans. Ken Frieden, in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: the play of negativity in literature and literary theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the teachings of twentieth-century art forms* (New York; London: Methuen House, 1985), 53. Hutcheon distinguishes between this semantic function and the pragmatic function of evaluation.

<sup>9</sup> Spencer’s selection of the neuter relative pronoun has biblical precedent, as in “Our Father which art in Heaven” (Matthew 6: 9).

<sup>10</sup> See Hoffman, *Negatio Contrarii*, 2.

---

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: ethnographic imagination in the nineteenth century* (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>12</sup> George Landow, *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), pp. xxx - xxxi.