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***The End of 'Progress': Herbert Spencer's
Evolutionary Psychology and George
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Writings of the past few decades have viewed Herbert Spencer as a somewhat enigmatic figure. Historians of the nineteenth century, of science and sociology and current evolutionists continue to argue, sometimes vehemently, over his status as either heroic or villainous innovator in psychological and sociological evolutionary thought. Much of the discussion naturally focuses on the differences/similarities between Spencer and Darwin's evolutionary theories, with emphasis on "Lamarckism" as the key differentiating factor.^[ii] Others, such as Robert Young and Rick Rylance, have stressed Spencer's contribution to psychology. Still others—Georges Canguilhem, for example—have portrayed him as an ideologue. J. D. Y. Peel offers a sympathetic reading of Spencer and his work, with a key interest in his role as a sociologist.^[iii] By drawing on some of these interpretations of Spencer, as well as his own works, I hope to offer some insight into how Spencer defined "development", his ideas on adaptation—the inheritance of acquired characteristics—and some of the broader implications of his applications of these two premises. Finally, I will turn to a purely fictional text, George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil" for a comparison to how some of these implications surfaced in contemporary culture.

As an evolutionist, Spencer has been forgotten while Darwin is regarded as the father of evolutionary theory. However, in actuality, it seems that difference is not so clear-cut. As Derek Freeman explains, Spencer's theory of evolution was based on a Lamarckian notion of hereditary transmission of acquired adaptations "at first exclusively and always predominately" (215). Darwin started with natural selection as his basis for evolution in his first edition of Origin of Species,

while in later editions backing off to allow for the possibility of inherited adaptation. Freeman himself veers into an ideological, neo-Darwinist reading of Darwin's views on transmitted acquired characteristics and his ill-fated pangenesis hypothesis. However, he does show how Spencer's dependence on Lamarck led to the abandonment of his theories, while Darwin's emphasis on natural selection allowed his theory greater "adaptability" in future scientific debate.

At the heart of these differing emphases lie the differing approaches of Spencer and Darwin. Spencer started with the idea that all development must be progressive and then sought a mechanism to explain this idea. Conversely, Darwin began with his field research and extrapolated his theory on development from there. The difference is one of deductive and inductive reasoning. Spencer published his ideas as he developed them, and as the evidence mounted against his version of evolution his scope for adaptation to objections was limited. Spencer's theory of evolution was part of his greater plan of establishing a universal, overarching philosophy of progressive change, thus supporting his *laissez-faire* political views. Darwin's natural selection, with its emphasis on random mutation, however, did not necessarily imply progressive change. To better understand the implications of Spencer's ideas of evolution and progress, and their application to the human mind, it is important to look at some of his earlier works.

Spencer's definition of evolution as movement from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous is a progressive process adhered to not just by organisms, but by the universe at large, including inanimate matter and social structures:

Should the Nebular Hypothesis ever be established, then it will become manifest that the Universe at large, like every organism, was once homogeneous; that as a whole, and in every detail, it has unceasingly advanced towards greater heterogeneity; and that its heterogeneity is still increasing . . . thus Progress is not an accident, not a thing within human

control, but a beneficent necessity. (Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause” 52)

Although he clearly states there that “Progress” is not under human control, when he applies “Progress” to human society, Spencer does intimate that the individual can act as agent on his or her own part: “rigorous necessity . . . when allowed to operate, *becomes so sharp a spur to the lazy*” (Spencer, Social Statics 323). Also his hypothesis that “complex differentiations which adults exhibit, are themselves the slowly *accumulated* and *transmitted* results of a process like that seen in the first changes of the germ”, seems to indicate that humans do have some amount of agency in their progress—the choice whether to adapt or to suffer and possibly die, as well as the level of adaptation they wish to undergo—whether to merely survive or thrive (Spencer, First 418, emphasis added). In his First Principles, Spencer only slightly restates his original idea, that “evolution . . . under its primary aspect, is a change from a less coherent form to a more coherent form” (First 327). Earlier, in 1855, Spencer had applied evolutionary principles to intelligence in The Principles of Psychology. The development of psychology had reached a point in 1855 where “what was necessary was a redrawing of the taxonomies of psychological theory so that one did not begin with the apparently stable (though in fact very complex) phenomena posited by old traditions” (Rylance 216). Spencer was the one to offer a bridge between the competing schools of faculty and associationist psychology, thanks in part to his past interest in the pseudoscience of phrenology. Young has illustrated how Spencer’s background in phrenology, a branch of faculty psychology, lent itself to his reading of John Stuart Mill’s Logic to offer a progressive, but not strictly sensationalist/associative, biological explanation of the development of the mind. [\[iii\]](#)

By inserting the biological concept of evolution into associationist and faculty accounts of mind development, Spencer was able to explain how specialized mental functions (similar to faculties) could be developed through experience (associationism). In Spencer’s psychology, these functions—he called them

“forms of thought”—were not necessarily the product of a single individual’s life experiences, but rather an accumulation of the experiences of its ancestors. These accumulations eventually become “organic”, or innate. In order to explain the development of the mind in this way, it was necessary for Spencer to broaden his study from the individual to the race, thus allowing enough time for the development and transmission of these “forms of thought”.

Spencer’s theory of progressive development and adaptation—the “perfectibility” of humankind—if taken to its logical conclusion, has other interesting implications. I will now turn to the possibility opened up by Spencer’s insistence that “the history of all organisms whatever . . . is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous” and that “from the earliest traceable cosmic changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation . . . is that in which Progress essentially consists” (“Progress” 3). He attempts to base this law on “The Instability of the Homogeneous”, a chapter heading in his First Principles:

Thus a stick poised on its lower end is in unstable equilibrium: however exactly it may be placed in a perpendicular position, as soon as it is left to itself it begins, at first imperceptibly, to lean on one side, and with increasing rapidity falls into another attitude. Conversely, a stick suspended from its upper end is in stable equilibrium: however much disturbed, it will return to the same position. (347-8)

Thus Spencer attempts to incorporate the laws of thermodynamics into his own First Principles. Citing the second law of thermodynamics, Spencer addresses the ‘doctrine that the Sun is gradually losing its heat’ (494) and tries to incorporate this into his theory of movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity. “Thus”, he concludes, somewhat contradictorily:

It illustrates the law of equilibration in the perpetual balancing of all its movements . . . infinitely remote as may be the state when all the relative motions of its masses shall be transformed into molecular motion, and all

molecular motion dissipated, yet such a state of complete integration and complete equilibration, is that towards which the changes now going on throughout the Solar System inevitably tend. (495)

Spencer had already implied what the end of “Progress” would look like in 1850 in Social Statics, when he claimed that “belief in human perfectibility merely amounts to the belief that, *in virtue of this process, man will eventually become completely suited to his mode of life*” (63). Again, in First Principles, he reiterates this: “this is the limit of organic heterogeneity, to which Man has approached more nearly than any other creature” (502). What does this imply for the development of the mind in the human race?

In The Principles of Psychology, Spencer explains the development of consciousness and the “higher” functions of the mind as a result of the division of labour within the brain, or movement from a homogeneous substance to heterogeneous “forms of thought”. Thus, as interactions between an organism and its environment become more complex, the processes of the mind become more complex. Increased “correspondence” causes previously automated mental processes to become too complex to be performed unconsciously, and then we have the rise of consciousness. “Progress” occurs when these complex processes are rendered automatic again through repetition, ultimately giving the brain more of what could be called “processing power” than it possessed before. Thus, brain development becomes increasingly complex.^[iv]

According to Spencer’s philosophy, “Progress”—the “perfectibility of man”—is a “necessity”. This means a movement toward organic harmony between “internal” and “external” relations, and in terms of the mind, “if the inward connection is perfectly organic, the action is of the reflex order, either simple or compound; and none of the phenomena of consciousness proper, exist” (613). He describes such a stasis in terms of motion as well in First Principles, “equilibration” will inevitably end in cessation of all motion. It is not impossible to read this as a sort of mental entropy, and Spencer comments on this as well. “If Evolution of every

kind is an increase in complexity of structure and function that is incidental to the universal process of equilibration . . . are we not manifestly processing toward omnipresent death?’ That such a state must be the outcome of the changes everywhere going on, seems beyond doubt” (Spencer, *First* 513-4). As Peter Allan Dale has commented, “Spencer’s way of formulating the question nicely brings out the price the positivist pays for reducing the energy we call consciousness to a physical basis . . . in such a beginning of mind lies its end, an inevitable return to . . . radical disorder” (299). Although Spencer staves off this inevitable cosmic death by reminding us that it is in the distant future and that the process of equilibration will become increasingly slower as a result of decreased differentiation between internal and external; the “inevitability” of this death still remains.

In following Spencer’s arguments, I have veered off the path of scientific inquiry into the realm of the purely philosophical and speculative. Such a course is natural, as Spencer’s entire system of thought does so itself. The necessitarianism of his arguments, beginning from the solar system, which must develop according to his doctrine of increasing complexity, through to its application to human civilization, is innately entropic itself. It is a closed system, which through its increasing complexity—necessitated by his dogmatic attempts to defend his work—collapses in upon itself. It is thus difficult to fully explore the ramifications of his philosophy through the discourse of science alone. Although psychologists such as Henry Maudsley did apply such notions to degeneracy of the mind and morals, Spencer’s ideas are perhaps best left to the world of fiction. In the fictional realm, authors are “unhampered by laws of corporeal possibility” (Flint 458). Spencer’s body of work functions much better as a controlled “experiment” in deduction. It is with this in mind that I will now turn to a “speculative” fiction of Spencer’s time.

In my attempt to connect Spencer to a contemporary creative text, it is important to keep in mind that “in considering the intellectual culture of psychological theory in the mid-nineteenth century we are dealing with a network, and not a

hierarchy, just as the psychologists themselves were seeking to understand the mind as ‘threads of connection’, and not as the exercise of selective, presiding faculties” (Rylance 212). George Eliot was definitely part of this network, as Spencer’s friend and George H. Lewes’s partner. The work I will examine, “The Lifted Veil”, was written in 1859 when Spencer had already written his primary psychological text, his “development hypothesis” and was formulating his overarching “Synthetic Philosophy”. Thus, the ideas I have discussed above were most certainly in their minds.

“The Lifted Veil” has experienced a revival in recent years; it is no longer “A Forgotten Tale”, as Elliot Rubinstein called it in 1962.^[vi] While numerous critics have highlighted the elements of pseudoscience, economics, religion, feminism and ethical questions regarding scientific enquiry within Eliot’s novella, I am concerned with the specific aspects of this text that play with concepts close to Spencer’s notion of “correspondence” and equilibration.^[vii] Spencer’s picture of equilibration, though presumably comforting, has sinister undertones of dehumanisation and stagnation:

when population shall have become dense over all habitable parts of the globe; when the resources of every region have been fully explored; and when the productive arts admit of no further improvements; there must result an almost complete balance . . . each society will exhibit only minor deviations from its average number, and the rhythm of its industrial functions will go on from day to day and year to year with comparatively insignificant perturbations. (First 510)

Eliot’s protagonist, Latimer, develops extrasensory powers of clairvoyance—both prevision and thought reading—after an unexplained illness. Latimer’s first vision paints a similar picture, of:

a city under broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course—unrefreshed for ages by the dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty,

wearily, time-eaten grandeur of people doomed to live on in stale repetition of memories . . . the city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze . . . seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this place . . . the fathers of ancient faded children . . . who worship wearily in the stifling air of the churches, urged by no fear or hope, but compelled by their doom to be ever old and undying, to live on in the rigidity of habit, as they live on in perpetual mid-day, without the repose of night or the new birth of morning. (11-12)

This is a place where time has stopped, a place evocative of Spencer-*cum*-Helmholtz's earth that has halted on its axis, facing toward the sun. The "ancient children" of eons of inherited adaptation have become automatons, driven only by the "rigidity of habit".

Latimer's vision is ultimately one of his own fate. His abilities put an interesting spin on the notion of correspondence between "internal" and "external" events: the mental events of others, normally "internal" are paradoxically externalised as readable by Latimer, and then re-internalised as occurring inside his own mind. It seems that, whatever the cause, Latimer's mind has developed a new "higher" function.^[viii] However, though Latimer at first welcomes his new powers with joy, they soon become a burden:

it was like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness. The weariness and disgust of this involuntary intrusion into other souls was counteracted only by my ignorance of Bertha, and my growing passion for her. (Eliot 26)

Bertha, Latimer's love interest, is the only person whose mind Latimer is unable to read. This urges him on, against the warning of his own previsions of their future life as miserable, to marry her. Latimer explains this as human nature: "so absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole

future were laid bare to us beyond today, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between” (44). Although Spencer’s “last day” before complete equilibration for the race—the cessation of all conscious mental acts—is in the indefinite future, Eliot brings the “last day” back into the sphere of individual experience. For Latimer, it occurs on the day of his father’s death. After witnessing his father’s death—both objectively and subjectively—he leaves the sickroom to encounter Bertha, now his wife. His subjective experience of death has left him altered, and Latimer is now able to see into Bertha’s mind as well and finds that it is “only a blank prosaic wall” (49). In a sense, Latimer’s conquest of Bertha’s thoughts is his mind’s last act of equilibration.

In this final state of psychological integration, Latimer finds himself “dead to worldly ambitions” (50): “for my one ardent desire had spent itself, and *impulse no longer predominated over knowledge*” (51, my emphasis). On an individual level, Latimer has become all-knowing, he foresees his own death and he can read the minds of all he encounters. This final integration of information has led to stasis, and he is too impassive even to contemplate suicide. Knowledge has killed any sense of the volition he formerly possessed. Latimer has, in sense, become an automaton, separate from human society, and this results in fluctuation of his abilities: “all that was personal in me seemed to be suffering a gradual death . . . is was as if the relation between me and my fellow-men was more and more deadened, and my relation to what we call the inanimate was quickened into new life” (55). His denial of the personal is similar to Huxley’s take on metaphysical philosophy where “the only way to escape from our heritage of evil is to destroy that fountain of desire . . . to refuse any longer to be the instruments of the evolutionary process, and withdraw from the struggle for existence” (Huxley 63). Such is Latimer’s logical, if not actual, suicide. Like T.H. Huxley’s anti-evolutionist “Indian ascetic anchorite”, Latimer has reduced his “mind to that condition of impassive quasi-somnambulism, which . . . might run the risk of being confounded with idiocy” (64). He is, in fact, taken for an idiot by his wife, their servants and their neighbours.

On one hand, it seems possible to see Latimer as the individual running parallel to Spencer's fate for the race. It is also possible to read him as a follower of Spencer, one who accepts the doctrine of necessity to the point of absurdity. Even though his advanced mental powers allow him to foresee the disaster of his marriage, he does not attempt to avoid it. Instead of being put off by the horror of that "moment of hell", he is egged on by the promise that Bertha will one day be his (Eliot 29). He does not attempt to subvert the future. Likewise, although Huxley's lecture is a call to override the cosmic process in establishing an ethical society, he accepts that:

If, for millions of years, our globe has taken the upward road . . . some time the summit will be reached and the downward route will be commenced. The most daring imagination will hardly venture upon the suggestion that the power and the intelligence of man can ever arrest the procession of the great year. (85)

However, this is exactly what Eliot tries to imagine within in a miniaturized, fictional realm of Latimer's individual life.

Eliot's "daring" and imaginative scientist Charles Meunier resurfaces near the end of Latimer's life and performs, not one, but two resurrections. Latimer's school chum Meunier returns for a visit, temporarily rousing Latimer from his "inertia", and giving him "an interest in the passing moment" that he had since thought impossible (57). "I . . . felt as if his presence would be to me like a transient resurrection into a happier pre-existence" (57). The effect of his visit is so stimulating for Latimer that he begins to hope not only for a "transient resurrection" but perhaps a permanent cure: "might there not lie some remedy for *me*, too, in his science?" (58, emphasis original). However, as Spencer had stated, even education intervention cannot help: "the circumstances to which adaptation is taking place cannot be superseded without causing a retrogression" (Social Statics 325). Latimer witnesses first-hand such a retrogression when he assists in Meunier's literal attempt at resurrection, the revivification experiment.

Bertha's maid, Mrs. Archer, falls ill during Meunier's visit. As her death seems inevitable, Meunier requests permission to attempt to revivify her. Immediately after she expires, he performs a blood transfusion, pumping his own blood into her corpse. As life slowly returns to the woman's body, Meunier, Latimer and Bertha are shocked when Mrs. Archer regains consciousness and accuses Bertha of plotting to poison her husband. It is not the accusation that Latimer finds so horrifying, but rather Mrs. Archer's hatred. "Great God! Is this what it is to live again . . . to wake up with our unstilled thirst upon us, with our unuttered curses rising to our lips, with our muscles ready to act out their half-committed sins?" (Eliot 65). Compared to Bertha, who "did even her hate in a self-restrain hygienic manner" (59), the revived Mrs. Archer "does" her hatred in an atavistic outburst. To turn back the clock, to cheat death, is to retrogress on an evolutionary level. This is the end of Latimer's hope for his own personal "resurrection", and even the daring Meunier is "paralysed; life for that moment ceased to be a scientific problem to him" (65). There is no way to subvert equilibration; within the origin of consciousness lies its end. Latimer's story is circular; it is told as a narrative of the past events of his life, written during his final days. Thus, at the end, we have returned to the present, with Latimer impassively waiting for death at the prescribed date: "it is the 20th of September 1850. I know these figures I have just written, as if they were a long familiar inscription. I have seen them on this page in my desk unnumbered times, when the scene of my dying struggle has opened upon me. . . ." (66-7). Thus, the narrative of his life is a closed system, eventually dissipating itself into "that complete equilibrium we call death" (Spencer, First 501).

The "official" death of Spencer's own theories seems to have come in the twentieth century with the rediscovery of Mendel's work and resulting genetic theory. However, his notion of evolution as necessarily progressive "has become so ingrained" in the thoughts of some scientists (and many laypersons) that "they have even resorted to using the term devolution to describe changes which lead to a decrease in complexity of organization".^[viii] Since Spencer's theories have been

proven to have a volatile ideological currency both during his time and ours, it is important to constantly examine and re-examine the ways this currency is circulated throughout the network of creative thought—both scientific and fictional. In my brief examination of Spencer and Eliot’s work, I hope to have illustrated a possible route of inquiry into this network.

Endnotes

^[i] By “Lamarckism”, I am referring to the theory of Lamarck, as explained by R. Young below: *Lamarck’s theory*: “had two aspects: an inherent tendency to progress in life, and perturbations of this due to the recalcitrance of the environment. The secondary factor led to organisms to acquire structural modifications as a result of striving, and these were passed on to the next generation” (Young, Historical 199).

“*Lamarckian*” evolution or “*Lamarckism*.” “What most of us mean by ‘Lamarckian’ evolution is the version of the theory which became popular once Spencer . . . conflated the two aspects of Lamarck’s doctrine and made the inheritance of acquired characteristics the mechanism of inevitable biological and human progress” (199).

^[ii] See G. Canguilhem. Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences. trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1988 and J. D. Y. Peel. Herbert Spencer: the evolution of a sociologist. London: Heinemann, 1971.

^[iii] See Mind, Brain and Adaptation, particularly 150-96.

^[iv] See especially Principles of Psychology 533-620.

^[v] See E. L. Rubinstein. “A Forgotten Tale by George Eliot.” Nineteenth Century Fiction, 17.2 (1962): 175-83.

^[vi] See L. S. J. Butler. “The discourse of religion among Victorian doubters.” Victorian Doubt. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990. 56-85; T.

Eagleton. "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil.'" Literature and History 9 (1983): 52-61; B. M. Gray. "Pseudoscience and George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil.'" Nineteenth Century Fiction 36.4 (1982): 407-23; J. Wood. "Nervous Sensibility and Ideals of Manliness." Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 59-109; as well as Flint and Rubinstein, above, for alternate readings.

^[vii] Of course, it is also possible to read his clairvoyance as simply pathological. See Eagleton and Wood in particular.

^[viii] See C. J. Bajema's reply to Freeman, included in the Freeman essay, 222.

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First Response

The interrelations between science and literature in the nineteenth century have become established as one of the areas very much at the leading edge of research. The present article offers interesting comments on Herbert Spencer's theories of Evolution, especially in comparison with Darwin's, and then investigates George Eliot's application in *The Lifted Veil* of concepts close to Spencer's notions of 'correspondence' and 'equilibrium' in the evolutionary process. The essay reveals in particular the darker implications of Spencer's thinking, where, as these are brought out by Eliot, the dominant themes are dehumanisation and stagnation. As a non-specialist I found the discussion of Spencer and his scientific milieu informative, but I was most engaged by the reading of the psychology and actions of Eliot's protagonist, Latimer, against this background. We are usefully prompted at the end, however, to think in terms, not of isolated texts or disciplines, nor

simply of contemporary influences upon George Eliot, but of the wider 'network of creative thought - both scientific and fictional'.