Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction
by Gillian Beer
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Darwin told us a story about ourselves. Novelists tell us stories of ourselves. Is there then some essential similarity between Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and, say, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*? Gillian Beer thinks there is, and I believe she has some important points that illuminate both Darwin and Eliot, both biological science and the knowledge discovered by fiction. Unfortunately she has concealed her illuminating points within a cloudy book that will put off all but a handful of fellow specialists in a small branch of literary studies. Let me try, however presumptuously, to recast her argument, with critical additions that may open the issues to a wider audience.

Consider one of the plots Ms. Beer ignores: Darwin’s tale of hair. All human races, he observed, have dabs of hair in the groin, the armpits, and on the scalp. Is that beautiful or not beautiful? (My question echoes the opening line of *Daniel Deronda*.) Darwin does not care. He will not indulge the aesthetic judgment even to the extent of mocking it, as many twentieth-century writers would, by noting the absurdity of seeking beauty in natural objects such as the pattern of hair on the human body. He does consider the pattern bizarre, from the viewpoint of natural selection, for there is no adaptive advantage in those four dabs. They must therefore be the result of sexual rather than natural selection, like the peacock’s tail or the baboon’s red behind, fixed in the species by a persistent attractive function in the process of mating. They are important to Darwin as evidence that all races of *Homo sapiens* derived from a single ancestral stock, which must have shared lustful delight in that bizarre pattern of hair before separating in racial preferences for different textures of hair and shapes of lip and nose. Even skin color, which may have some source in natural selection, is mainly a product of sexual selection in Darwin’s story. He fleetingly indulges his aesthetic judgment as a white racist, when he agrees that it is ridiculous to think black skin attractive. But he beats down that feeling with the factual observation that Negroes consider black to be beautiful.

Thus, with respect to aesthetic values Darwin’s *Descent of Man* strives to be thoroughly relativistic and reductive. Beautiful and not beautiful are bizarre products of sexual selection, changing functions of the reproductive process in particular species and varieties. Ms. Beer is unconvincing in her effort to rescue Darwin from his unaesthetic reputation. She dwells on the fact that he read poetry in his youth, and simply ignores the anti-aesthetic significance of his reasoning about sexual selection. She also fails to note the fundamental difference in Darwin’s reasoning about moral values. In his story the baboon mother who sacrifices herself defending her baby against a predator exemplifies a sublimely progressive moral faculty, altruism, which is rewarded by natural selection and deservedly praised by the loftiest philosophies and religions. Whether he measures by numbers in reproductive success or by a universal scale of values rising from lower to higher, “the intellectual and moral faculties” emerge in Darwin’s tale as products of the evolutionary process which deserve veneration. They are his echo of Tennyson’s “one far-off event toward which the whole of creation strives,” willy-nilly. But the pattern of human hair, like the plumage of birds or the color of a baboon’s backside, is merely a function of the ephemeral process in a particular species or variety. A thing of beauty is not a joy forever; the romantic poet who said it was was at odds with the biological reasoning of Darwin’s story.
Now consider that opening question in *Daniel Deronda*: “Was she beautiful or not beautiful?” It is startling in its apparent insignificance as the thematic introduction to a nine hundred-page novel, and George Eliot leaps to reassure the reader by fusing the aesthetic question with a moral problem: Was the heroine’s power of attraction good or evil? “Probably evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?” From there on the novel explores the differences between narrow love of self, with a consequent urge to dominate others, and self-sacrificing love of others, with a consequent urge toward a life of service. Evidently George Eliot and Charles Darwin shared that characteristic obsession of nineteenth-century thinkers—true love as self-sacrifice rather than self-satisfaction—but their different ways of picking at the sore are probably more important than their similarities. We can see this if we turn their obsession into a larger question: who deserves love? Is there a standard of individual merit more significant than patterns of hair or shape of nose? The Darwinist points to reproductive success as the standard, but that was certainly not George Eliot’s view. Her story is concentrated on spiritual qualities, as they emerge from the interplay of individual temperament with the surrounding society and culture.

Darwin’s story also strove to rise above the physical, to reach moral judgments, but it was still fundamentally biological, too crude in its moral judgments—altruism versus selfishness—to encompass such subtleties as the distinction between beauty that coerces and beauty that wins loving consent. On the other hand, George Eliot was aware that the spiritual subtleties that filled her novel might be dismissed as trivial in an age increasingly enthralled by science and technology, mass politics, and the drift to total war. There is a famous passage in *Daniel Deronda* that confronts head-on the justification of such a novel: Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant?—in a time, too, when ideas were with fresh vigour making armies of themselves, and the universal kinship was declaring itself fiercely...a time when the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unheard, until their full sum made a new life of terror or of joy.

What in the midst of that mighty drama are girls and their blind visions? They are the Yea or Nay of that good for which men are enduring and fighting. In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affections.

A twentieth-century reader should resist distraction by George Eliot’s assumption that passive women shape “the treasure of human affections” by saying Yea or Nay to the goals of active men. On the whole, as Ms. Beer argues, George Eliot came much further than Darwin toward a realistic view of women. His “story” made women inferior to men in intellect, though superior in angelic spirit. The prime angel of the house in George Eliot’s story is a Jewish man, Daniel Deronda. But let us return to the main theme of the quoted passage, George Eliot’s defense of her novel as prophetic revelation, as discovery of the most exalted kind of knowledge. Ms. Beer is correct in noting that the defense shares the nineteenth-century passion for knowledge as a unified vision of all evolutionary processes: cosmic, geological, biological, intellectual, and moral, all rising toward some asymptote of ultimate perfection. George Eliot’s claim is that imaginative literature achieves knowledge of the highest levels, brings long-range sight to the “blind visions” of everyday life.

Ms. Beer also notes the beginning of the end for such overweening claims. But she frustrates the reader with her brevity and vagueness on the self-defeating qualities of the stories
she is reviewing. Darwin’s vision pointed, however unintentionally, toward population genetics and sociobiology, with no criteria of progress but reproductive success. George Eliot’s novelistic achievement, as distinct from her prophetic claim, pointed toward literary art that offers no evolutionary telescope, no way of placing “girls and their blind visions” within a progressive “treasure of human affections.” The characters who embody angelic values are unbelievable; those who flounder in “blind visions” or indulge petty passions come vividly alive. That is an obvious reason for Ms. Beer’s critical judgment: “Although much of the surface of the book’s argument seems to lead” toward an “optimistic reading of evolutionary ideas,” “there is a counter-surge beneath.” But the countersurge is not presented clearly and sharply in Ms. Beer’s monograph. One must supply one’s own sense of Daniel Deronda to perceive the accuracy of her final judgment: “In this work change...must figure itself as disruption and incompleteness, however much the book’s enterprise strives toward unity.” Ms. Beer shies away from the harsh truths that would clarify and justify that conclusion. The part of the quotation that I have omitted continues her confusing refusal to distinguish between Darwin’s theory of sexual selection and George Eliot’s vision of girls shaping the treasure of human affections by saying Yea or Nay to the aims of enduring and fighting men. Toward writers who were less spiritual than Eliot, Ms. Beer has been wilfully brief and one-sided. Zola, most notably, slips by as the author who delighted in fecundity, not the one who described slum children as “pinkfaced vermin” (see L’Assommoir), and scandalized the public with his notorious declaration: “I have chosen people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free-will, drawn into each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature...human animals, nothing more” (Introduction to Thérèse Raquin).

However exaggerated and deliberately sensationalist, such claims need to be examined if we are to understand the impact of biological thought on nineteenth-century fiction. Such a study would be as valuable as Joseph Warren Beach’s magisterial work, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry. Instead, Ms. Beer has sought to soften the grim features of modern intellectual history, to give easy reassurance, and she has written a novelistic analogue to Lionel Stevenson’s mushy tract, Darwin Among the Poets.

Ms. Beer’s central theme of easy reassurance is “Romantic materialism,” a thread of affinity that is supposed to link Wordsworth with Darwin and George Eliot, and even with Thomas Hardy. What does that concept mean, with or without her magnifying her “Romantic” and her belittling lowercase materialism? The simplest response is feeling at one with nature, with the material universe. And the quickest way to see the trouble with Ms. Beer’s theme is to ask how Wordsworth would have reacted to Robert Frost’s post-Darwinian way of feeling at one with nature:

Space ails us moderns: we are sick with space.
Its contemplation makes us out as small
As a brief epidemic of microbes
That in a good glass may be seen to crawl
The patina of this the least of globes.

(See “The Lesson for Today,” Frost’s witty construction of a debate between a medieval scholar and a modern on the question, Whose age is worse?)

Wordsworth and the other early romantics had trouble with the bleak view of inhuman nature that science was already establishing—not “Pretty Scenery,” but the “Whole Goddam Machinery,” to quote Frost once again—but they repressed the trouble with passionate affirmations of harmonious unity between human nature and nature as the material universe. Kant epitomized the fundamental affirmation, and the difficulty that would wreck it, at the conclusion of his Critique of Practical Reason. He looked up at the night sky and declared
his faith that the physical laws of moving stars and planets must harmonize with the moral laws moving in his spirit, but he confessed that he could not prove the harmony by rigorous thought. A century and a half later Camus concluded *L’Etranger* (*The Alien*) might be a more accurate translation than *The Stranger*) with his anti-hero looking at the night sky out of a prison cell, and feeling brotherhood with the stars because they are inhuman, without consciousness; he is waiting to be guillotined by his fellow men, hoping only for a large crowd and shouts of execration.

Ms. Beer brushes over the long history of conflict between romanticism and science. She resolutely insists that Darwin absorbed Wordsworth’s vision into biological science. “Darwin had sought to share Wordsworth’s testamental language in his image of ‘Natural Selection,’ which identified nature with benign planning and makes of natural selection a more correct form than man’s merely artificial selection.” Even if one ignores the fuzziness of such a statement, and agrees that Darwin had some such intention—Ms. Beer concedes intermittently that his intentions were not so simple—his achievement was utterly different. His theory of natural selection fixed in modern minds the conviction that was emerging from the natural sciences long before Darwin, the conviction that Wordsworth and the other early romantics were struggling to repress: that the natural universe is essentially indifferent to human values, whether aesthetic or moral. Ms. Beer dwells on Darwin’s reluctance to acknowledge that obvious implication of his own theory; she avoids the more significant fact that biological science since Darwin has pursued his logic and discarded his reluctance.

She also indulges in wishful concentration on authorial intention rather than achievement with respect to George Eliot: “In [her] later novels we have an imagination permeated by scientific ideas and speculations, an imagination which can achieve what Wordsworth looked towards in the second Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”—and she quotes without embarrassment Wordsworth’s dream of science becoming “familiarized to men,” with “the Poet [lending] his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration.” Surely Wordsworth’s dream was not of “disruption and incompleteness.” I am embarrassed, on Ms. Beer’s behalf, not only by the incongruity between Wordsworth and George Eliot’s fiction, but even more by the history of poetry in relation to science.

One of the simplest ways to see the dominant trend is to note what happened to animal images in the poetic expression of aesthetic and moral values. In Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” to take a famous example, there is a force that animates all of nature, joining worms with humans with angels on high, all singing together in Beethovenian exultation. Schiller himself had trouble maintaining that faith; in “The Gods of Greece” he lamented the disappearance of the gods that used to animate nature, their replacement by the inhuman laws of physics. By the time that Dostoevsky’s romantic hero, Dmitri Karamazov, read Schiller, he felt no exultation but shame, for he saw himself as an animal, linked to the worm by sensuality, cut off from the spiritual joy of angels.

But worms, after all, had long served as symbols of degradation. Schiller, one might argue, was unwittingly anticipating the defiant romanticism of Baudelaire when he dared to exult in our kinship with worms. Consider then the ant, an ancient symbol of steadfast industry, foresight, and cooperation. Among the early romantics Shelley celebrated “an ant-hill’s citizens” as “kindred beings”:

> How wonderful! that even
> The passions, prejudices, interests,
> That sway the meanest being—the weak touch
> That moves the finest nerve
> And in one human brain
> Causes the faintest thought, becomes a link
> In the great chain of Nature!

(“Queen Mab,” II. 101–108)
Darwin’s theory of natural selection broke up the great chain of being into an endless whirl, and Dostoevsky’s Underground Man turned the symbolism of the anthill quite around, into the meaning it regularly conveys in current usage: mechanized human beings, soulless, unfree, deprived of all individuality and spontaneity, except for the self-destructive possibility of asserting the self in defiance of enslaving nature and society. That exception is the essence of latter-day romanticism.

George Eliot did not read Dostoevsky, but the scientific spirit of the nineteenth century moved her to analogous use of animal imagery: to debase characters whose motivating force is inhuman. Her villainous aristocrat Grandcourt, an intelligent creature moved only by the will to dominate, is variously compared with an insect, a crab, or a boa constrictor. In our century I am aware of no writer except B.F. Skinner who has audaciously tried to revive the anthill as a symbol of a desirable society. (See Walden Two.) To be sure, some sociobiologists have tried to move evolutionary theory in a similar direction. But most biologists working in evolutionary studies try hard to avoid any sort of anthropomorphism, whether degrading or uplifting, determined as they are that their science must be morally neutral. How far they can succeed is a critical issue, and so is the question how far romantic writers can carry defiance of the fact that we are natural objects. Such questions need to be confronted, not mystified by hazy dreams of “Romantic materialism.”

Occasionally Ms. Beer notes the issues that Darwin raised for our conception of ourselves. For example, when discussing Origin of Species, she makes this accurate point: “The absence of any reference to man as the crowning achievement of the natural and supernatural order made the text disquieting; but the entire absence of man as a point of reference or a point of conclusion would have rendered it nihilistic.” Ordinarily she is quite reluctant to acknowledge that “nihilistic” possibility in Darwin’s “plots,” his stories of natural history.

At the very end of the book, dealing briefly with Thomas Hardy, who brought out the possibility with tragic power, she resorts once again to “Romantic materialism” as the saving grace. It saves by blurring our vision, dissolving the “nihilistic” implications of Darwin’s and Hardy’s narratives into a haze of thoughtless sensations:

To Darwin, the plot that his own writing proposed seemed (or needed to seem) benign. Hardy perceived the malign tautology latent in it: the “struggle for life,” or, even more, “the survival of the fittest,” pre-emptively extolled the conquerors. Those who survived were justified. But he shared with Darwin that delight in material life in its widest diversity...which is the counter-element in Darwin’s narrative and theory...his writing conjures the intimacy of the senses by means of which we apprehend the material world.

Would it be too harsh to say that the concept of “Romantic materialism” has here dissolved both scientific theory and narrative plot into sensuous mush?

Perhaps the most fundamental source of cloudiness in Gillian Beer’s book is her sense of an easy way out of the tormenting disjunctions that frame most of our thinking: factual knowledge separated from evaluative judgment, abstract generalization from narrative plot, equation from metaphor, science from art. She is happy to report, early in the book, that those disjunctions have been reasoned away by some recent scholars, so she feels emancipated from analysis of their painful emergence in nineteenth-century writers, as they opened lines of disjunction that have fragmented twentieth-century culture.

Ms. Beer has indulged a happy reverie about science and literature as compatible forms of knowledge since she believes Charles Darwin and George Eliot intended them to be so. My criticism has been prompted by great respect for the task that provoked the reverie: to discover the links between science and literature, on the assumption that both are ways to
knowledge. Different ways, I have been insisting, to different kinds of knowledge, and in those differences lie the painful but unavoidable problems of Darwin and Eliot and other modern thinkers. It seems impossible to believe that scientific understanding of ourselves as natural objects has no connection with evaluative understanding of ourselves as moral agents and things of beauty (or ugliness). Yet the fragmented culture of modern times has persistently moved toward that impossible belief. We cannot change that history, our history, by absorption in failed dreams of escaping it.

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