



REVIEW

Darwin the Writer

by George Levine

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 244 pages

reviewed by Michael Roos

A common assumption among even the most educated modern readers is that it isn't necessary to read Darwin in order to understand and appreciate the import of his ideas. An enlightened contemporary human can get along just fine, we presume, without having read *The Voyage of the Beagle*, *On the Origin of Species*, or *The Descent of Man*, so long as we know the essentials of the theory and how it produced us and the rest of life. At one time, not so long ago, I would have counted myself in this group. For many years, I quite contentedly read lively modern summaries of evolutionary theory by the likes of Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne, Kenneth Miller, and others, satisfied I was getting all of Darwin that was necessary and having a reasonably fine time in the process. Ultimately, however, I reached a point where something like guilt set in. As my absorption of the truth of evolution grew ever deeper, so did my sense that it is fraudulent to call myself a Darwinist without having read the original texts. So I girded my loins and prepared for battle.

Yes, I have to admit, I approached Darwin's texts not without a real sense of trepidation, expecting to have to slog through hundreds of pages of dry and dreary pre-modern scientific writing unfriendly even to a serious and avid 21st-century reader such as I. However, what I discovered, much to my surprise, was not the dull, difficult, and depressing writing of the sad man Darwin is so often depicted to be, but instead found works that, although awkward at times, revealed a genuine love of language and metaphor, an engaging sense of wonder and awe before the world, and a humble, likable author possessed of an ear for the well-tuned sentence—in other words, a real writer. Darwin's great works are now ones that I, as a student of the best literature of all ages, look forward to re-reading often.

If you haven't already discovered this fact for yourself (or even if you have), George Levine's fine new book, *Darwin the Writer*, will certainly assist you in recognizing the beauty of Darwin's language and convince you of the importance of actually reading Darwin before you start conversing in any depth about his ideas. A distinguished scholar of Victorian literature, Levine has had a longstanding almost emotional connection to Darwin. He is deeply passionate about the man's ideas and perhaps even more so about his language. In fact, Levine argues that Darwin's continual relevance in the 21st century is as much dependent on the quality of his writing as it is on the quality of his ideas. We need only remind ourselves of the degree to which Darwin's theory was limited by his own Victorian prejudices and the scientific tools available to him, especially so when it came to an understanding of heredity and genetics. So, for a thorough and up to date explanation of the science of evolution, numerous modern scientific writers other than Darwin serve us better. It is Levine's task, however, to show us that reading Darwin today is more than a

mere journey back to the quaint and innocently ignorant beginnings of his theory, in other words, more than a historical exercise.

Darwin the Writer is an extension of Levine's previous books on Darwin, beginning with *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) and continuing through the excellent *Darwin Loves You* (2006). In the first book, with a relatively narrow audience of literary scholars, Levine's aim was to demonstrate the degree to which evolutionary concepts infiltrated and eventually permeated 19th-century literature and culture. Then, in *Darwin Loves You*, he sought a much wider readership and directly challenged the notion that Darwinian theory has, in Max Weber's famous terminology, "disenchanted" the modern world by having stripped it of its spiritual meaning. Here, in a heartfelt, impassioned, and finally convincing treatise, Levine revealed how enchanted Darwin himself was with the evolutionary world that he uncovered and how meaningful a truly Darwinian view of the world can be. Instead of stripping meaning from the world, Levine argued, a Darwinian view, in fact, recognizes how all of life's elements are charged with meaning and significance, a recognition that allows us to become newly enchanted with the world in a far richer and deeper way than any religious meaning could ever provide.

Now, in the new book, Levine intends to show us how much of Darwin's enchantment with the world is inherent in the very language of his great texts, especially *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *On the Origin of Species*. Levine begins by insisting that *On the Origin of Species* is the most important book in English literature written in the 19th century. Certainly, if he had declared Darwin's book the most important scientific treatise of its time, perhaps even of all time, there are few who would disagree. But to claim that its literary stature outshines works such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, Wordsworth's "The Prelude," or Tennyson's "In Memoriam" gets our attention, to say the least. Levine wants us to know that Darwin's book remains "something more than its ideas." This is not to say that Levine minimizes Darwin's ideas; for, as he admits, the quality of the ideas fed the quality of Darwin's writing. Both good science and good writing require precision, and Darwin was obsessive in his attempt to be precise.

In the end, Levine's most important point, and a point likely to take many readers aback, is his insistence that Darwin's vision, especially in *On the Origin of Species*, is a comic one—comic, that is, in the literary sense, in its movement through a full awareness of the pain and suffering in the world to a final recognition of the triumph of life—affirmation and celebration of life in all its wondrous forms. Of course the book's famous last paragraph serves as Levine's best evidence, the "grandeur" of Darwin's "tangled bank." Darwin achieves this through what Levine calls a "double movement" in his prose, in which Darwin takes himself (and his readers) through intuitive feeling, allows us all to struggle with the feeling, and leads us out into the light of new scientific knowledge.

After chapters on Darwin's skillful writing in *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *On the Origin of Species*, Levine presents a particularly fascinating exploration of Darwin's proficient use of surprise and paradox, making the case, along the way, that Sherlock Holmes stands as one of the great Darwinian characters of literature, and this path leads Levine to make an even more surprising and paradoxical connection between Darwin and Oscar Wilde in the next chapter. The book concludes with a somewhat less surprising but no less insightful chapter—focusing on the similarities between Darwin's propensities toward the grotesque

and the generally bleak vision of Thomas Hardy, although, in this case, Levine chooses one of Hardy's less overtly bleak novels, *The Woodlanders*, as his point of illustration.

Although Levine's erudition is impressive and he requires his readers to wade through pages of endnotes, he is nevertheless a most engaging writer, and his passion for Darwin is evident in every sentence. Reading one of his books can feel like absorbing the essence of twenty or more books by different authors—in other words, a very rich experience. The fact that he goes to great lengths to sing the praises of fine Darwinian commentary by the likes of Gillian Beer, Robert J Richards, Adrian Desmond, and James Moore, among others, only serves to underscore Levine's humility as a scholar. In this, Levine clearly follows the master himself, Darwin. But George Levine has his own uniquely important contributions to Darwinian scholarship and deserves to stand alongside those other distinguished commentators. While this book is perhaps less broadly significant in impact than was *Darwin Loves You*, it is a worthy successor, and I highly recommend it.

REFERENCES

- Levine G. 1992. *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NCSE member Michael Roos is Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College. His recent scholarly work has focused on Darwinian influence in the life and work of Ernest Hemingway. His article "Faith and reason: Darwin and Agassiz in Hemingway's high school zoology class" will appear in the spring 2013 issue of *The Hemingway Review*, while another article, "A Darwinian reading of Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River,'" is a finalist for a soon-to-be published collection, edited by Kevin Maier, called *Hemingway and the Natural World*. His book of creative non-fiction, *One Small Town, One Crazy Coach: Pete Gill, the Ireland Spuds, and the 1963 Indiana High School Basketball Season*, will be published by Indiana University Press in fall 2013. A singer-songwriter, he has also produced three CD collections of his own music, the most recent of which, *Begin 2*, was released in 2011.

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