CHAPTER 12

A Darwinian Revolution in the Humanities

Darwin's *Descent of Man* fed into a larger stream of “naturalistic” thinking in the philosophy and literature of his time. In contrast to the naturalistic visions of philosophers such as Herbert Spencer and Friedrich Nietzsche, Darwin's vision was grounded in careful reasoning about scientific evidence. He linked us with the other animals as no one had ever done before—logically, scientifically, in a cool and methodical spirit of disinterested inquiry. Though he included passages of grand rhetoric, his vision was not at heart rhetorical. Nor was it deeply inflected with any ideological animus. Over the period of a century and a half, these differences of intellectual quality have made a decisive difference in the magnitude and character of Darwin's influence. Nietzsche, violent, ferocious, and never quite sane, has had his day. Spencer grows dusty on the shelves of antiquarian intellectual history. In our thinking on man's place in nature, Darwin is closer to us now than he has ever been before.

*On the Origin of Species* had an almost immediate impact on biological science—on the recognition that species had evolved and had not just been “created” by divine fiat. Darwin’s theory about how species had evolved—by means of natural selection, through a process of adaptation—was suspended in controversy for another half century. The Modern Synthesis, integrating genetics with the theory of natural selection, settled that controversy. Though scientific judgment on Darwin’s explanation for the mechanism of evolution remained in suspense for decades, the idea of evolution itself—the
idea of “descent with modification”—has shed a continuous light on our understanding of other species. The social sciences followed a very different trajectory. For them, the Darwinian dawn was like the light of a day in the far North, when the dawn and dusk have scarcely any time between them. Around the turn of the century, three great minds, those of John Dewey, William James, and Thorstein Veblen, caught something of Darwin’s illumination. In the second decade of the twentieth century, though, founding figures in the social sciences turned resolutely away from Darwin’s naturalistic vision of man’s place in nature. This is a story that has now often been told—how Durkheim, Kroeber, Lowie, and others built the cultural box outside of which no one could think. Humanity produces culture, they declared, and culture produces humanity. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, this vicious conceptual circle formed the boundary for most thinking in the social sciences.1

In the magnificent conclusion to The Descent of Man, Darwin evoked and affirmed the nobility of the human mind—the “god-like intellect” that has “penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system.” Darwin would perhaps have been surprised at the extent to which this god-like mind bears within itself the power to be vastly clever in supporting the flimsiest possible ideas. Why did humans—so far along the way in their descent from their “lowly origins”—descend to folly like that of the culturalist circle? How could intelligent people ever have convinced themselves that humans hold themselves up in mid-air, creating cultures out of nothing? Pride, for one thing. If we create culture, and culture creates us, then we create ourselves. Milton’s Satan would have understood something of the psychological impulse behind the culturalist theory, and all the more once he discovered, as Nietzsche would have explained to him, that God was dead. With God out of the picture, humans had no choice but to take responsibility for making their own world.

Pride and a sense of ethical responsibility are both real motives, but to make a theory plausible, one needs more than motive. A theory is plausible, on some level, because it appeals to our sense of reality, however fanciful that sense might be. One reality supporting the notion that culture makes human nature is that we do, in fact, live in the imagination. “A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.”2 That’s a poet talking, Wallace Stevens, and of course poets have a vested interest in the imagina-
tion, but then, in that respect, they are only human. Humans are very strange and unusual animals. Like other animals, they are driven by their passions, prompted by their instincts, goaded by their physical needs. Unlike other animals, though, they create imagined worlds and live in them. We know the world is real, and physical, and yet the real physical world for us is always mediated by images and beliefs, dreams and fantasies, ghosts and demons. We have believed in some very strange things—for instance, in the immortality of the soul, the geocentric universe, and the freedom of the will. Is it any wonder, then, that we should look to culture, the fabrications of our minds, and believe, in our simplicity, that culture contains nature?

The culturalist beliefs that ruled the social sciences through most of the twentieth century were not, in the first place, convictions founded on reason and evidence. They were part of an ideology. It is the nature of an ideology fundamentally to subordinate truth to value. Religions are in this respect ideologies, also. Marxism, with all its panoply of science and its plausible appeal to socioeconomic causality, is still an ideology. Veblen saw into the quasi-religious character of the Marxist historical vision. He saw that the Marxist vision is teleological. It is an imaginative, emotional belief in a transcendent force of progress driving toward an ultimate ideal condition, a consummation of history, the final harmonious concord. That ultimate ideal condition consists in brotherhood and cooperation, a social order based on justice and equity. The Marxist state would be a world constructed in concord with our own purposes and ideals.

We can regard the twentieth century as an empirical test for the hypothesis that we could construct a world on this plan alone—posing an ideal social order and building social structures that reflect that ideal. It was an experiment, and the experiment failed. Ideals alone are not a sufficient basis on which to construct a social order. We also have to take account of human nature. What Darwin knew, and what we have now once again begun to realize, is that human nature makes culture. We can still erect ideals and live by them. We can construct social policies that reflect our sense of justice and decency. But we can’t do it effectively unless we take account of the materials with which we have to work. Social institutions are made out of people. People are made out of human nature. Understanding human nature—really getting down to the
details in neurology, anatomy, physiology, hormones, and behavioral
dispositions encoded in genes—that is the only chance we have of
constructing social systems that do not blow up in our faces.

Over the past thirty years or so, we have finally started to come
to terms with human nature. Edward O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, published in 1975, is a historical landmark. An
imaginative arc reaches from the final paragraph of *The Descent of Man* to the final chapter of *Sociobiology*—the chapter on human
nature. Both Darwin and Wilson have the larger vision of man’s
place in nature. More than any other single work, the final chapter
of Wilson’s book set off the sociobiological revolution in the social
sciences. That revolution is now entering a mature phase. All its
subsidiary disciplines and schools—behavioral ecology, human
ethology, evolutionary psychology, Darwinian anthropology, behav-
ioral genetics, cognitive neuroscience, and the rest—form part of a
new paradigm that is becoming ever more firmly established. If it is
true, as Dobzhansky famously said, that nothing in biology makes
sense except in the light of evolution, it is equally true that nothing
in human behavior makes sense except in the light of sociobiology.¹
That is the larger vision and the larger logic. For the details, one
can look readily to excellent popular accounts, now multiplying
on an almost daily basis, to books by David Buss, Richard Dawkins,
Daniel Goleman, Daniel Nettle, Steven Pinker, Matt Ridley, David
Sloan Wilson, Frans de Waal, Nicholas Wade, and many others.

For slower going, but more massive confirmation, one can look at
handbooks such as *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, edited
by David Buss, and *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*,
edited by Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett.

For the past thirty years or so, while the social sciences were
going through a Darwinian revolution, the humanities have been
running in an almost exactly opposite direction. While scientists
concerned with human behavior have been recognizing that human
culture is shaped and constrained by an evolved and adapted human
nature, the humanities have been proclaiming, flamboyantly but
with a virtuoso skill in sophistical equivocation, that the world is
made of words—“discourse,” “rhetoric.” This too was a revolution—a
breaking free from nature and reality, a last euphoric fling into the
vanities of imagination. “There is no outside the text.”¹⁵ So Derrida
told us. Humans did not exist either as individuals or as a species
before we thought of them in that way. So Barthes and Foucault
told us. Sex is purely a social construct. So a whole generation has
told us. None of it was true. Such things are still often said, in a
tired and routine way, but deep down, nobody has ever thoroughly
believed them. We all wake up at some point and feel the massive,
overwhelming reality of our own biological existence in a physical
world. Just step off a curb, in a moment of distraction, get brushed
by two tons of metal moving at high speed, and you will have an
instantaneous, spontaneous conviction that there is indeed a world
outside the text.

God died a lingering death in the nineteenth century. The
fundamentalists will tell us that reports of His death, like that of
Mark Twain, have been greatly exaggerated. But really, there has
been no exaggeration. Three or four centuries ago, the most serious
thinkers could still easily envision their conceptual constructs
as emanations within a divine creation. Not now. Theology is a
sideshow at best, and the main intellectual show goes on without
any reference at all to transcendent powers. Even the Marxist
sublimations of the transcendental spirit in History have now
ceased to sway the minds of most serious thinkers. Looked at on
an evolutionary scale, the disappearance of divinity from the world
has been instantaneous. Looked at on the scale of cultural history,
the transition has been more gradual, with many an eddy in intel-
lectual backwaters. During the later part of the nineteenth century
and the first half of the twentieth, the humanities have been one
such backwater. Matthew Arnold, one of the last great Victorian
Men of Letters, saw clearly the fading of the divine light. For him,
it was a sad change, a disenchantment. In compassion to himself
and his fellows, he suggested a substitute for the romance of reli-
gion. He said that the most active parts of religion were morality
and poetry, morality lit up by the enchantments of poetry. In the
future, he said, poetry would be our new religion. It would be the
channel of the transcendent human spirit. 6 Hard to believe now. I
mean, it is hard now to believe that anyone ever believed that. But
Arnold’s essays on religion sold phenomenally well on both sides
of the Atlantic, and the Arnoldian religion of poetry and culture
were central animating forces in the humanities well into the third
quarter of the twentieth century. The New Critics, as they were
called in the middle decades of the century, were for the most part
both Christians and adherents of the Arnoldian religion of culture.
The greatest theoretical mind in literary study in the middle of the
twentieth century was that of Northrop Frye, and Frye was both
a Christian minister and a Romantic mystic. Most of all, he was a
proponent of Culture, in the Arnoldian sense. He believed that
the total order of literary words represents an embodiment of the
mind of God. 7

For the first six decades of the twentieth century, the humanities
were the chief refuge of mystical fervor in the world of intel-
ect. Then, a revolution took place. If Marx turned Hegel on his
head, Derrida turned Frye on his. Frye looked to literature for a
spiritual plenitude, and Derrida flipped that vision over into
nihilistic vacancy. Endless “deferral” took the place of an ultimate
consummation. Derrida often proclaimed the world-historical,
apocalyptic character of his vision, and many literary theorists
shared in this giddy delusion. Looking back now, both of these
visionary phases seem outlandish and a little absurd. The mystical
illuminations of Arnoldian humanism were afterglows of a lost
cause, and the epochal inversions of deconstruction were baubles
of a metaphysical rhetoric more suitable to the thirteenth century
than to the twentieth.

For the past fifteen years or so, a counterrevolution has been
taking place in the humanities, and especially in literary studies.
The literary Darwinists took to heart the vision of The Descent of Man
and Sociobiology: The New Synthesis. Following Darwin, they saw that
“man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly
origin.” 8 Like Darwin, they recognized that stamp not only in the
human body but also in the human mind. They felt the charm in
the very title of the seminal volume in evolutionary psychology, The
Adapted Mind, and they rallied to the cry for intellectual unification
in Wilson’s Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge.

I think it fairly safe to predict that the profession of literary
scholarship will eventually, necessarily, be encompassed within
the wider world of naturalistic knowledge. The humanities will
not be able to sustain much longer the idea of a world made
out of words, either in the mystical version represented by Frye
or in the nihilistic version represented by Derrida. The heyday
of deconstruction was astonishingly brief—a delirium that swept
through English departments, infected almost everyone, and
then suddenly departed, supplanted by the political criticism of
Foucault and company. Literary study has to have substance. It
has to deal with human realities, with psychological impulses and
social forces. Derridean wordplay offered too thin an atmosphere in which to breathe. Deconstruction left behind merely a spirit of subversion and a mystified belief in the transcendent reality of “discourse.” The substance of discourse was filled in by Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and the brooding Foucauldian preoccupation with social “power.” For the past two or three decades, that theoretical swirl has been the medium of mainstream thought in the humanities. It cannot last. The Marxists are social theorists, and the Lacanians are psychologists. The forms of psychology and social theory now propounded in the humanities cannot compete effectively with the forms available in the evolutionary human sciences.

In their dependence on jargonized speculative fantasies, the humanities have drifted off into an intellectual third world. That will have to change, and is already changing. The humanities are in crisis and know it. The titles of edited volumes and special issues of journals tell the tale. People in the humanities are not unintelligent. They have simply been trapped in local currents of intellectual history. At some point in the not too distant future, the sheer embarrassment of being unable to contribute in any useful way to the serious world of adult knowledge will, I think, have a decisive effect in reorienting the discipline. At the end of Evolution and Literary Theory, I said, “whatever happens within the critical institution as a whole, the pursuit of positive knowledge is available to anyone who desires it. Within this pursuit, the opportunities for real and substantial development in our scientific understanding of culture and literature are now greater than they have ever been before.” That was nearly fifteen years ago. Since then, the opportunities have only increased.