

The human angle

Three biographies of Darwin compared

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For the past several years, I have been working to integrate literary study with Darwinian ideas about psychology and culture. Here, to illustrate my approach, I shall consider three recent biographies of Darwin, discussing aspects of biography that are not peculiar to Darwin's case – matters of method and point of view, temper and style – but also addressing the question of how Darwin's own thinking can or should enter into the writing and reading of biographies of him at the present time. One of the three biographies affiliates itself with Darwinian theory, and two of them adopt, in contrast, the broadly Marxist conceptions that Paul Gross and Norman Levitt characterize as "the academic Left" (Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The academic Left and its quarrels with science*, 1994). The first is by the late John Bowlby, a distinguished British psychoanalyst associated for many years with the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, who corrected Freudian notions of child development through research into the evolved structure of human nature. The other two biographies are by established scholars of Victorian science and intellectual history: one (reviewed in the *TLS* of September 13, 1991) is co-authored by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, both highly regarded specialists in this period, and the other (reviewed in the *TLS* of September 8, 1995) is by Janet Browne, an editor of Darwin's correspondence.

Each of the biographies has been praised by qualified judges, although Bowlby's has been the least noticed and admired. I shall argue that the relative public success of these books betrays a deep deficiency in the judgments that are regulated by certain widespread conventional expectations, and I shall sketch out alternative criteria of judgment. By these criteria, I judge Bowlby's biography to be by far the most valuable of the three. For me, it already takes a place within a very small set of contemporary scholarly books that seem to have potential classical stature and that serve as a touchstone for distinction and high merit.

Bowlby's work as a psychologist culminated in *Attachment and Loss* (1960–82), a magisterial three-volume study of traumatic separation between children and parents. This work has high prominence in its own clinical field, and far-reaching implications beyond – for psychoanalytic thought generally, and for all behavioural and social science. Bowlby assimilates Freud's insights into the formative influence of childhood experience, but he also constructs a model of human nature that rejects Freud's belief that human nature consists in a few basic unstructured drives such as hunger, thirst and sex. For Freud, all other behaviour is derived from these basic drives through a process of social learning, and in this respect Freud's views are closely aligned with those that have dominated social science for most of this century. In opposition to these views, Bowlby maintains that human nature has evolved as a complex set of adaptive psychological structures. Thus, whereas Freud regards the child's attachment to its mother as the "secondary" effect of receiving food and warmth from her, Bowlby explains that attachment as itself a primary adaptive characteristic. Expanding from such findings to principles of the broadest import, he argues that "not a single feature of a species' morphology, physiology, or

behaviour can be understood or even discussed intelligently except in relation to that species' environment of evolutionary adaptedness".

Bowlby is not a professional historian or biographer. He is none the less a fine scholar, and he does a highly creditable job of situating Darwin in his historical setting. Still, he cannot compete with the other big biographies in the sheer wealth of contextual detail that constitutes their chief merit. His own qualities are a sensitive appreciation for Darwin's personal and intellectual character, and a firm imaginative grasp of his scientific vision. Here, for example, he explains how his full-scale biography developed out of his more narrowly focused concern with Darwin's chronic psychosomatic illness:

I found myself captivated by Darwin as a maturing personality and gifted scientist, and also by the large extended family in which he grew to manhood, by his devoted wife and their numerous children, by his circle of scientific friends and colleagues, in short by the whole drama of his eventful, troubled and extraordinarily productive life. . . .

[Darwin] is the most influential biologist to have lived. Not only did he change the course of biological science but he changed for ever how philosophers and theologians conceive of man's place in nature. An outstanding scientist who excelled first as an observer and later as a theorist and experimenter, he was also a singularly attractive character beloved by family and colleagues alike.

Bowlby does not hesitate to offer expressions of his personal response – of being "captivated" and of finding Darwin "singularly attractive" – but these expressions are supported by observations of fact. Darwin was demonstrably a very gifted scientist; his work did in fact have a revolutionary impact; and he was indisputably beloved by his family and friends. Not all admiration and affection are naive or misplaced. Biographies are not likely to be written about men or women who have no outstanding merit. To register such merit, to realize it vividly and bring it home to the heart and imagination of the reader, is surely a primary duty of a biographer. But it is a duty that runs counter to deep-seated impulses of invidious egoism, and it runs counter also to powerful forces in the set of mind that currently prevails in the humanities – in literary history and criticism, as in the history of science. In this respect, the conventional point of view has undergone a virtual reversal. Thirty years ago, a conventional work of biography or of literary criticism might easily have fallen into fatuous adulation or insincere admiration. At the present time, for a biographer to be both just and generous to Darwin, or to Matthew Arnold, George Eliot or Joseph Conrad, requires a truly exceptional largeness of spirit, both a liberality of feeling and an independence from conventional expectations.

The biography by Desmond and Moore has won widespread admiration among reputable scholars. For instance, Marjorie Greene regards the book as a "magnificent piece of work". George Levine considers it "arguably now the best biography of Darwin we have". And Stephen Jay Gould declares roundly that it is "unquestionably the finest ever written about Darwin". The prominence that has been given to their work is an important, symptomatic fact in contemporary cultural history. A striking feature of the book's reception is that most reviewers, no

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ELIE AGUR

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DARWIN AND THE RESTORATION OF ENES

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This book introduces a hypothesis which might prove to be the most revolutionary in the history of science. The centre of mass, which Newton assumed to be static, is a dynamic force-centre that advances in the direction of motion and in proportion to its rate in all moving bodies. Consequently gravity transforms into detrudition (Joyceanism for 'detrusion' and 'de-tradition'). No longer a 'force of attraction'! Bodies are bound to move towards other bodies by virtue of their motion mechanism in a universe whose space's density steadily increases towards the centres of mass of all bodies, proportionately to their masses.

Stephen Hawking was "unable to comment" on these and many related ideas put forward in the first 29 poems of the book and their footnotes, and wisely refrained from adopting any suggested observation, ranging from "worthy of some consideration" to "obviously misguided". Indeed, how should a first-rank physicist like him appraise the radical untested notions of a poet?

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matter how enthusiastic, have felt it incumbent on themselves as historians to point out that the authors have thoroughly and systematically distorted the evidence. Desmond and Moore frequently wrench quotations wholly out of context, or wander off into historical fiction and fantasy, presented as fact. The reviewers have regretted these lapses, but have apparently not felt that mere truthfulness was a primary criterion of worthiness in a biography. It has also been noted that Desmond and Moore adopt a tone that is often snide and disparaging, that their style is sensationalistic, and that their own moral and political stance is self-righteous. If reviewers note such things, why do they then still regard the book with such favour? The most important reason, I suggest, is that Desmond and Moore so vigorously endorse the Marxist thesis that Darwin's "key ideas" have "political roots". They contend that the theory of natural selection is really only a "metaphoric extension" of the ideology arising from the socio-economic conditions of Victorian Britain. This view would be fashionable when applied to any writer, but it must be received with particularly high favour when applied to Darwin. In the Darwinian paradigm, all political structures are rooted in the biological nature of human beings. By treating the development of Darwin's ideas as an example of the Marxist creed, Desmond and Moore outflank Darwin, and by treating Darwin himself with disrespect, they make it easier to hold his theory in contempt.

For the sake of a comparison with Bowlby, I will give just one example of the manner they adopt towards their subject. One of Bowlby's central themes is the development of Darwin's sense of scientific method. In his autobiography, Darwin himself reports that while he was at Cambridge he read two books which together transformed his conception of science and did much to crystallize his sense of vocation. One was a theoretical work on scientific method by John Herschel, the other a memoir of scientific exploration by Alexander von Humboldt. Darwin declares that these books "stirred up in me a burning zeal to add even the most humble contribution to the noble structure of Natural Science". Bowlby cites the appropriate passage, analyses Herschel's theory, and integrates it with his larger understanding of Darwin's method. If we are to construct an intelligible account of how an unformed young man became one of the world's great scientists, it is indispensable that we register the imaginative quality of such moments. And for this particular moment literature offers an instructive parallel. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot describes the growth of a scientific passion in her young doctor Lydgate, and to evoke this passion, she uses a rhetoric very similar to Darwin's. "He was fired with the possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery . . . He longed to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure, and help to define men's thought more accurately after the true order." Now consider the way Desmond and Moore treat a similar episode in Darwin's life. They start by posing the question of scientific method:

What sorts of "evidence", "facts", and "laws of nature" were acceptable, and how were they established? Darwin swotted up the subject from a new, compact book by the doyen of science, Sir John Herschel . . . It ignited Darwin. He glimpsed the limitless scope for scientific explanation and the rapid progress of every branch of knowledge . . . The sky was the limit. Darwin closed his eyes and exuded a "burning zeal" for science.

There are many such moments of slapdash caricature in the book, flippant mockery appealing to idle cynicism, but the amusement is dearly

bought at the price of distorting and trivializing Darwin's experience. The bouncy vulgarity of style, kept up for nearly 700 pages, is one in which no meditative depth or dignity of mind could possibly be registered.

Janet Browne's biography is the first of two projected volumes. The first takes Darwin's life up to the mid-1850s, after his theory of natural selection was fully worked out but not yet published. At the end of this first, she summarizes the theory of natural selection and offers an interpretative statement that accords fully with the Marxist views of Desmond and Moore:

Much of this was perhaps familiar to a nation immersed in competitive affairs. Darwin had transformed the generalised entrepreneurial ethos of English life into a biological theory which, in turn, derived much of its support from these all-pervasive cultural commitments. The theory of natural selection could only have emerged out of the competitive context of Victorian England.

To present the theory in this way as nothing more than a superstructural reflex of a capitalist base neatly begs the question as to whether the theory is actually true. But if the theory is true, Darwin has gained insight into natural processes that are deeper than any specific form of economic organization.

For Desmond and Moore, the idea that social and political events shape all scientific ideas serves as a convenient substitute for more complex forms of causal analysis. They can simply give a running narrative of such events and point to the theory as the supposed result. Browne's case is rather different. Despite the statement in her conclusion, on the level of causal analysis she is by no means a thorough and committed Marxist. She has very few such programmatic statements as that which I have just quoted, and gives relatively scant attention to political movements and events. Her conclusion thus seems to come out of nowhere. It is not a statement of conviction but rather a substitute for conviction. She lacks any larger analytical framework, and must consequently make use of an explanation that she takes from the store of commonplace ideas currently available within the prevailing ideology.

Commenting on one of the characters in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot observes that "a kind Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition". A similar comment could be applied to Browne. She adopts the commonplace sentiments that accompany the ideas in the prevailing doctrine. Like the Marxist thesis invoked in her conclusion, and more consistently invoked by Desmond and Moore, these sentiments fill a gap. They take the place of any individually realized and deeply felt values.

Browne is an immensely capable scholar. She has immersed herself in all the multifarious social and professional networks of Victorian science. She understands very clearly the status of complex theories at precise moments of history, and is able to locate all the individual actors within densely realized social and institutional structures. She has little feeling for the emotional life and the intimate personal relations of her characters. In comparison with Bowlby's rich and subtle evocations of personality and personal relations, her characters are largely blank. But if she lacks the novelist's sense of a private inner life, she has in compensation a novelistic sense of the more public forms of social interaction. Her own values and feelings are merely conventional, but in compensation she has an intuitive feel for the force of convention. She understands convention as virtually a living thing, a semi-autonomous thing in itself, a medium for the common intellectual life of the time.

Browne is a historian. When we ask what kind

of gum or starch ideological convention provides for her, it is appropriate to start with her sense of history, and all the more appropriate since the ideological conventions she adopts are those of New Historicism. To my ear, the term New Historicism has an unintentionally ironic overtone, for it almost always implies a failure to participate with imaginative sympathy in the deeper forces at work in cultural history. New Historicists seldom give us any feeling for the constructive energy that has been necessary to create the great civilizations. What they give us instead is a formulaic, two-dimensional pattern of history as a record of wanton oppression. This is history as complaint and condemnation, written from the perspective of a facile moral superiority. To get a sense of the kind of historical imagination at work here, I recommend that you compare Browne's treatment of Darwin's parents and grandparents with Bowlby's treatment of the same figures. Bowlby makes it possible for us to understand what went into the making of the Darwin and Wedgwood dynasties - the energy, initiative and ability, the personal decency and the public integrity. Browne, in



A drawing by Meredith Nugent showing Darwin measuring the speed of an elephant tortoise on the Galapagos Islands, c 1830

contrast, treats the older generations as members of a sinister conspiracy of industrial intrigue and social exploitation. The same basic stance reappears, more centrally for Darwin himself, in her descriptions of the social and professional connections he used to further his scientific projects.

If New Historicism fails to register the creative forces in history, in what sense is it specifically historicist? One main feature of New Historicism is the deprecation or suppression of individual agency. For the New Historicist imagination, history is not the collective product of many individuals. It is rather a transcendent force that renders all individual identity nugatory. Here are two examples. After listing in detail all the people who in one way or another provided support or information to Darwin, including aunts, nephews and "unsuspecting household pets", Browne declares, "Darwin's work was entirely a social process in this sense". Her insistence on the all-sufficiency of the social process probably reflects her own temperamental disposition to weigh public life more heavily than private, and this disposition merges with a common if regrettable failing among biographers and literary critics, a yearning to belittle their subjects. Browne argues, "Because Darwin believed in the Victorian ethos of character - in the inbuilt advantages of mind - and unconsciously endorsed the cult of great men and public heroes that was so much a part of nineteenth-century life, he did not - could not - see that figures like himself were the product of a complex interweaving of personality and opportunity with the movements of the time." Now, Darwin himself would readily have acknowledged the importance of historical opportunities.

Indeed, no one has done more to deepen our sense of contingency in the total process of life. Browne's critique is designed not to expose any actual lack of insight in Darwin but rather to diminish the singularity of his achievement while simultaneously crediting herself with a critical acuity greater than that of her subject. Note the formulation "figures like himself". This phrase reduces Darwin to the member of a commonplace group, just one of a crowd. For writers like Browne, there are no great men, and to recognize greatness is to participate in a "cult" that extends throughout a whole century and that makes that whole century susceptible to supercilious condescension.

Browne succeeds in situating Darwin within his own time, the world of Victorian science. But because she participates in the conventional ideology of her own time, what she cannot do is to locate him in the far deeper time in which his own imagination moves. Bowlby offers less circumstantial detail about Darwin's time than either Browne or Desmond and Moore, but none the less gives a more complete and adequate sense of the world in which Darwin lives. He can give this sense, because there are two levels at which he makes much closer contact with Darwin's life and experience.

One level is that of the individual human being. Bowlby is a trained psychologist, and he has an intuitive sensitivity to the complexities of personal identity. In his handling, Darwin and his family and friends come to life as people, with all their own quite particular affections and sorrows, their faults, their virtues and their talents. Beginning with Erasmus Darwin, Charles's grandfather and a precursor to his theory of evolution, Bowlby constructs a narrative of family dynamics that crosses the generations and that includes affections and ambitions so intense that they can result in crippling griefs and suicidal depressions. The other level is that of a human nature beyond all local differences of culture and period. Darwin himself is the originary scientific source for our modern vision of human nature, and Bowlby, unlike the other biographers, has had the good sense to learn from his subject. Discussing an early essay in which Darwin "outlines theories not dissimilar to those current today in sociobiology", Bowlby quotes a passage in which Darwin proposes "looking at Man, as a naturalist would at any other mammiferous animal". From this angle of vision, Darwin concludes that humans have "parental, conjugal and social instincts". This is the conclusion Bowlby also reaches, and it is on the basis of this conclusion that he revises Freud's crudely oversimplified conception of human motivation.

Bowlby observes that Darwin's psychological research was long neglected and that this neglect was a "tragedy for the study of socio-emotional development which, lacking an evolutionary perspective, almost expired in the wastes of behaviourism and the jungle of psychoanalysis". He is among the first and the most important of the behavioural theorists to have revived Darwinian thinking, and by doing so, he has helped to breathe new life into psychology. By turning his psychological insight to Darwin himself, he demonstrates the imaginative value of the lessons he has learned from Darwin.

Bowlby has assimilated Darwin's naturalistic vision, and he shares as well Darwin's sense of civilization. He feels strongly the elementary value of the common human affections, and he uses his intelligence not to derogate from the achievements of genius but to appreciate them and to make them his own. Such an accomplishment is rare. It is one of those products of the critical imagination that is in itself a contribution to literature.

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