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 adding 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 affixes itself with Darwinian theory, and two of them adopt, in contrast, the broadly Marxist conceptions that Paul Grav and Norman Levitz characterize as “the academic Left” (Paul R. Grew and Norman Levitz, Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrel with Science, 1994). The first is by Jane John Bowley, a distinguished British psychoanalyst associated for many years with the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, who corrects Padian 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 andJeremy Noakes, both highly regarded specialists in the 19th 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 scholars, although Bowley’s has been the less hindered and admired. I shall argue that the intellectual public of successes of these books betrays a deep misunderstanding in the feeling that they are based on an incomplete or prejudiced view of Darwin himself.”

Behavior does not hesitate to offer expression of his personal response—of being “captivated” and of finding Darwin “singularly attractive”—but these expressions are not supported by observations of fact. Darwin was demonstrably a very gifted scientist; his work did in fact have a revolutionary impact; and he was indubitably beloved by his family and friends. Not all attraction 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 inveterate 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 faints of seduction or passionate adoration; at the present time, for a biographer to be both just and sincere is a feat, as with Darwin, or in Matthew Arnold. George Elliot or Joseph Conrad, requires a truly exceptional largeness of spirit, both a liberality of judgment and an independence of expectation.

The biography by Desmond and Moore has won widespread admiration among respectable scholars. For instance, Marjorie Grene 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 candidly that it is “unquestionably the finest ever written about Darwin”. The prominence that has been given to its work is an important, symptomatic fact in contemporary cultural history. A striking feature of the book’s reception is that most reviewers, so...
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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 dis- torted the evidence. Desmond and Moore fre- quently,wrench quotations wholly out of con- text, 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 workmanship in the new biography. It has also been noted that Desmond and Moore adopt a tone that is often disdainful and, that their style is sensationalistic, and that their own moral and political stance is self-righteous. If review- ers can open the book with such fervor! The most important reason, I suggest, is that Desmond and Moore so vigorously endorses the Marxist thesis that Dar- win’s “key ideas” have “political roots”. They consider that much of the theory of natural selection is really only a “metaphoric extension” of the ideology arising from the socio-economic condi- tions of Victorian Britain. This view will be fashionable when applied to any writer, but it must now be expected that what is fashionable when applied to Darwin. In the Darwinian para- digm, all political structures are rooted in the biological nature of human beings. By trusting the development of Darwin’s ideas as an example of the Marxist creed, Desmond and Moore can make the reader himself close-minded with respect, make it easier to hold his theory in contempt.

For the sake of a comparison with Bowly, I will give one example of the manner they adopt towards their subject. One can find it in the development of Darwin’s sense of scientific method. In his auto- biography, Darwin himself reports that while he had read the works of Bishop Huxley, he had never read any of the others, nor had he ever taken any of them seriously. This is in sharp contrast to the treatment given to Huxley in Bowly’s recent biography. Here, Bowly treats Darwin’s ideas as a convenient substitute for more complex forms of causal analysis. She can then, for example, ascribe a range of scientific achievements to Huxley alone. This is not to say that Bowly’s work is without merit, but it is to say that the treatment of a complex historical subject can lead to an over-simplification of the facts and the history of ideas.

Commenting on one of the characters in Middletown, George Otis observes that “a kind of anxiety pervades the finest minds” and that the “most intimate relations of living structures and help to define men’s thought more accurately after the trivial were the trial of the essence. We know that the way Desmond and Moore treat such a subject is to dismiss it. They start by posing the question of scientific method: What sort of “evidence”, “fact”, and “laws of nature” were the basis of evolution established? Darwin swept up the subject from a theoretical foundation of sciences, without mention. Sir John Herschel. He longed for the future possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery. He longed for a possible link in the chain of evolution. He longed for the appearance of a new kind of organism in the history of life. He longed for the appearance of a new kind of organism in the history of life.

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Indeed, so one has done more to obscure our discussion of the history of ideas. For Bowly, her criticism is designed not to expose any general lack of insight in Darwin but rather to diminish the singularity of his achievement while simultaneously judging herself with a critical scrutiny greater than that of her subject. The note the formulation “figures like himself”. This phrase reduces Darwin to the member of a com- monplace group, just one of a crowd. For writers like Bowly, there are no great men, and to rec- ognize greatness is to participate in a “call” that extends throughout the whole century and that makes that whole century susceptible to super- cillious commentators.

Bowly succeeds in situating Darwin within his own time, the world of Victorian science. But the theory is different, just one example of the manner in which he makes much closer contact with Dar- win’s world, simply by mentioning it.

One level is that of the individual human being. Bowly is a trained psychologist, and he has an intimate knowledge of Darwin’s personal life. He is able to draw on that knowledge to provide a rich and detailed description of Darwin’s life and work. For example, he describes the way in which Darwin’s health problems affected his work and his personal life. He also discusses the way in which Darwin’s relationships with his family and friends influenced his work and his personal life.

Bowly’s work is also important because it provides a rich and detailed description of the scientific community in which Darwin worked. He discusses the way in which the scientific community was organized and the way in which the scientists in it interacted with each other. He also discusses the way in which the scientific community was influenced by the political and social environment of the time.

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