

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

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1 idea of “descent with modification”—has shed a continuous light  
2 on our understanding of other species. The social sciences followed  
3 a very different trajectory. For them, the Darwinian dawn was like the  
4 light of a day in the far North, when the dawn and dusk have scarcely  
5 any time between them. Around the turn of the century, three great  
6 minds, those of John Dewey, William James, and Thorstein Veblen,  
7 caught something of Darwin’s illumination. In the second decade  
8 of the twentieth century, though, founding figures in the social  
9 sciences turned resolutely away from Darwin’s naturalistic vision  
10 of man’s place in nature. This is a story that has now often been  
11 told—how Durkheim, Kroeber, Lowie, and others built the cultural  
12 box outside of which no one could think. Humanity produces  
13 culture, they declared, and culture produces humanity. Until the  
14 latter part of the twentieth century, this vicious conceptual circle  
15 formed the boundary for most thinking in the social sciences.<sup>1</sup>

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

33 Pride and a sense of ethical responsibility are both real motives,  
34 but to make a theory plausible, one needs more than motive. A  
35 theory is plausible, on some level, because it appeals to our sense of  
36 reality, however fanciful that sense might be. One reality supporting  
37 the notion that culture makes human nature is that we do, in fact,  
38 live in the imagination. “A fictive covering / Weaves always glis-  
39 tening from the heart and mind.”<sup>2</sup> That’s a poet talking, Wallace  
40 Stevens, and of course poets have a vested interest in the imagina-  
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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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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1 details in neurology, anatomy, physiology, hormones, and behavioral  
2 dispositions encoded in genes—that is the only chance we have of  
3 constructing social systems that do not blow up in our faces.

4 Over the past thirty years or so, we have finally started to come  
5 to terms with human nature. Edward O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology:*  
6 *The New Synthesis*, published in 1975, is a historical landmark. An  
7 imaginative arc reaches from the final paragraph of *The Descent of*  
8 *Man* to the final chapter of *Sociobiology*—the chapter on human  
9 nature. Both Darwin and Wilson have the larger vision of man’s  
10 place in nature. More than any other single work, the final chapter  
11 of Wilson’s book set off the sociobiological revolution in the social  
12 sciences. That revolution is now entering a mature phase. All its  
13 subsidiary disciplines and schools—behavioral ecology, human  
14 ethology, evolutionary psychology, Darwinian anthropology, behav-  
15 ioral genetics, cognitive neuroscience, and the rest—form part of a  
16 new paradigm that is becoming ever more firmly established. If it is  
17 true, as Dobzhansky famously said, that nothing in biology makes  
18 sense except in the light of evolution, it is equally true that nothing  
19 in human behavior makes sense except in the light of sociobiology.<sup>4</sup>  
20 That is the larger vision and the larger logic. For the details, one  
21 can look readily to excellent popular accounts, now multiplying  
22 on an almost daily basis, to books by David Buss, Richard Dawkins,  
23 Daniel Goleman, Daniel Nettle, Steven Pinker, Matt Ridley, David  
24 Sloan Wilson, Frans de Waal, Nicholas Wade, and many others.  
25 For slower going, but more massive confirmation, one can look at  
26 handbooks such as *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, edited  
27 by David Buss, and *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*,  
28 edited by Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett.

29 For the past thirty years or so, while the social sciences were  
30 going through a Darwinian revolution, the humanities have been  
31 running in an almost exactly opposite direction. While scientists  
32 concerned with human behavior have been recognizing that human  
33 culture is shaped and constrained by an evolved and adapted human  
34 nature, the humanities have been proclaiming, flamboyantly but  
35 with a virtuoso skill in sophisticated equivocation, that the world is  
36 made of words—“discourse,” “rhetoric.” This too was a revolution—a  
37 breaking free from nature and reality, a last euphoric fling into the  
38 vanities of imagination. “There is no outside the text.”<sup>5</sup> So Derrida  
39 told us. Humans did not exist either as individuals or as a species  
40 before we thought of them in that way. So Barthes and Foucault  
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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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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1 twentieth century was that of Northrop Frye, and Frye was both  
2 a Christian minister and a Romantic mystic. Most of all, he was a  
3 proponent of Culture, in the Arnoldian sense. He believed that  
4 the total order of literary words represents an embodiment of the  
5 mind of God.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

30 I think it fairly safe to predict that the profession of literary  
31 scholarship will eventually, necessarily, be encompassed within  
32 the wider world of naturalistic knowledge. The humanities will  
33 not be able to sustain much longer the idea of a world made  
34 out of words, either in the mystical version represented by Frye  
35 or in the nihilistic version represented by Derrida. The heyday  
36 of deconstruction was astonishingly brief—a delirium that swept  
37 through English departments, infected almost everyone, and  
38 then suddenly departed, supplanted by the political criticism of  
39 Foucault and company. Literary study has to have substance. It  
40 has to deal with human realities, with psychological impulses and  
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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 Althus-  
 serian 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 evolu-  
 tionary 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 oppor-  
 tunities have only increased.

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