

George Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 272 pp.

George Levine is Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers University, where he founded the Center for Cultural Analysis in 1986. In the last two decades his interests have focused in particular on the links between science and literature, notably on Darwin. His books include *Darwin and the Novelists* (1992), *Dying to Know* (2002), and *Darwin Loves You* (2006). His other main area of interest is Victorian realism: he wrote, among others, *The Realistic Imagination* (1983), *How to Read the Victorian Novel* (2007), and *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism* (2008). He is now working on a book on secularism and the treatment of money in Victorian fiction. He is also an ardent if not terribly accomplished birder and has published a book on his birding adventures, *Lifebirds* (1997). In his latest work, *Darwin the Writer* (2011), written to celebrate the Darwin bicentenary, he investigates the literary component of Darwin's oeuvre.

Darwin the Writer starts out with a theoretical introduction, the central chapters explore stylistic and structural patterns of *The Origin of Species*, while the closing section provides case studies of the influence of evolutionism on literary culture. In the preface Levine specifies that he is writing as a «student of literature» and, referring to Darwin, he calls himself an «unrepentant partisan both of his ideas and of his art» (p. vi). His study focuses, in fact, not only on Darwin's thought, but also on his language and stylistic devices. Levine contends that people believe they know what Darwin said even without reading his

books, relying on second-hand knowledge. It is impossible, however, to understand Darwin without reading his works: his language, Levine reminds us, has to be experienced directly. The primary focus of *Darwin the Writer* is, indeed, the difference between «knowing what a book means» and actually reading it: simplistic analyses can only lead to misinterpretations of Darwin's theories.

In recent years there has been an increasing tendency to see Darwin as a cultural agent as well as a scientist. Scholars such as Gillian Beer and Jonathan Smith have written studies in which his works and personality are explored from a variety of perspectives. In *Darwin the Writer*, Levine investigates the formal and emotional dimensions of Darwin's scientific work, one of his main aims being to demonstrate why *The Origin of Species* cannot be considered a «dry scientific text». Levine's study combines, therefore, a vivid description of Darwin's explanatory method, a lucid outline of the subjects he treated, and a brilliant account of the main features of his prose. Let's look at Levine's main points.

First of all, *The Origin* is written in the form of a «personal testimony». This implies the presence of a first-person narrator who accounts for the experiences gathered during his travels. In addition, Darwin tried to put himself in the place of a skeptical reader in order to make his explanations more effective and intelligible. Other features of Darwin's prose are descriptive accuracy (which Levine describes as «dogged openness to fact» and «loving submission to detail», p. 18) and the lack of a hierarchic view of nature. Darwin gives every single creature equal importance, no matter how large or small it is. Each organism, however tiny and apparently insignificant, plays an important role in the natural world.

What is striking about the language of *The Origin* as analyzed by Levine is not only its orderly structure, but also its great affective power. Darwin is never coolly detached when he reports his findings: readers can always perceive an attitude of wonder and excitement. Far from

being drily scientific, Levine suggests, Darwin's narrative is resonant with the feelings aroused in him by the observation of nature. «The voice of the scientist is not yet fully disguised in the uniform of professional distance that working scientists must wear today» (p. 6). Darwin's emotional involvement helps persuade the reader of the effectiveness of his explanations.

A major feature of Darwin's prose is metaphor. The very term «natural selection» is a metaphor with two contrasting meanings. While 'natural' implies impersonality and indifference, 'selection' entails a meticulous and reasoned choice and the presence of a controlling intelligence. Levine argues, however, that this notion has been largely misunderstood by scholars, who tend to focus on its negative implications. For Darwin it had, conversely, a positive meaning despite the apparent indifference of nature.

Another interesting feature is the way Darwin describes animals and insects. In *The Origin*, each living being is presented as a character with a precise role in the 'story', which gives the narrative a mythical quality. The sympathy Darwin shows for these beings leads readers to share the narrator's feelings. The role of the spectator is prominent in *The Origin of Species*. The display of emotions is unusual in a scientific account, since an analytic text is usually nothing more than a detailed description with no additional meaning or references to the personality of the observer. On the contrary, the humble attitude of Darwin's narrator is pervasive, inscribing the text with a subjective dimension whereby the scientist questions his own statements and beliefs. The structure of Darwin's discourse – «wonder-explanation-wonder» – whereby an initial sense of marvel is followed by a detailed explanation that makes the object even more astonishing, keeps the text emotionally alive.

The way Darwin represents nature by means of aesthetic patterns such as the picturesque and the sublime is, furthermore, striking and unique. Although Levine focuses mostly on Darwin's style and textual

strategies, in the first chapter he tries to make the reader aware of the great split between the Victorian social and religious conventions and the innovative – not to say revolutionary – content of *The Origin*. While realist conventions laid emphasis on regularity, Darwin emphasizes the extraordinary, the aberrant, and the grotesque. The use of these categories was meant to undermine traditional Victorian values. «The Darwinian aesthetic», notes Levine, «leans toward parody and paradox, repeating the traditional forms and reversing the meaning» (p. 27). Darwin also used the grotesque to overturn the main arguments of natural theology, which maintained the existence of a rationally designed universe. By focusing on anomalies and exceptions, Darwin tried to undermine the belief in a guiding intelligence that rules the world and controls adaptation. The aesthetic patterns of *The Origin* demonstrate that Darwin had read Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757).

It is precisely in relation to the sublime that we should understand Darwin's innovative use of the grotesque, all the more since the links between Darwin and Victorian aesthetic culture, highlighted by the variety of critics Levine mentions in his book, are now self-evident. In *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (2006), Jonathan Smith carries out an in-depth investigation of the impact of the notions of beauty, the sublime, and the picturesque on *The Origin*, tracing their functions in the book. Focusing on language and rhetoric, Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983) examines the influence of Darwin's work on subsequent literary authors. Beer deals both with the stylistic devices employed by Darwin in his narrative and with their function in literary works influenced by the evolutionist theory. Other critics have read *The Origin of Species* as a myth of creation, comparing it with literary masterpieces such as Dante's *Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Such interpretations contribute to placing *The Origin* among literary classics. Drawing extensively from Beer and Smith, Lev-

ine suggests that the novelty of Darwin's text, with its emotional charge and its focus on the grotesque, may well have sounded scandalous at the time, and that one of the aims of *The Origin of Species* was to make readers familiar with his argument by contradicting their discursive expectations.

The final part of the study deals with Darwin's legacy. Darwin's works had a huge impact on the society of the time, and many writers took inspiration from his theories and style. One unpredictable heir of Darwin's thought was, for instance, Oscar Wilde, intrigued by the much-debated Darwinian paradox of the human consciousness as the product of chance. Another, rather different, disciple of Darwin's was Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who seems a fictional embodiment of Darwin himself. Holmes's method of investigation is just as analytic and detailed as Darwin's, while Watson, a correlative of the skeptical reader, is constantly reassured by his accurate explanations. Many other authors were inspired by Darwin's style and method, reproducing them in their works. This trend became more and more widespread, generating a Post-Victorian naturalism, as Gillian Beer argues in her book-length study.

Darwin the Writer is a clear, thought-provoking introduction to the main features of Darwin's style and textual practice. By presenting Darwin's work in a fresh light, Levine enables the readers of *The Origin of Species* to respond to its literary quality, thus gaining a broader and deeper understanding of Darwin's scientific achievement. *Darwin the Writer* is an invitation to read and appreciate a scientist who has shaped the modern world-view by using the devices of aesthetic representation.

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