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The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Darwins

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BOOK REVIEW

The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Darwins, by Devin Griffiths, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 352 pp., \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9781421420769

The theory of evolution was poetry before it became science, each time with a Darwin behind the pen. The relationship between Charles Darwin and his grandfather Erasmus has long proven a conundrum for the history of science, and it provides the frame for Devin Griffiths's masterful new book, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Darwins*. In solving this deceptively biographical puzzle, Griffiths re-theorizes "how books work" in ecological terms, arguing for the "deeply social nature of authorship" that includes not only "the intents of authors" but also "those of other human and nonhuman agents" (253). For Griffiths, "between the Darwins" marks a period in both senses of the term: an era and a mark of punctuation, the point at which one thought concludes and another becomes possible. It also marks a form of affinity, a "cross-generation collaboration" (255) that in turn becomes a model for thinking about the work of historical scholarship itself as a process of inventing the future through careful dialogue with the past. As a sphere of formal and epistemological innovation, Griffiths argues, "literature provides science with new kinds of stories and, hence, new ways to explore and understand natural history" (81).

At the core of *The Age of Analogy* is a concept that Griffiths calls "comparative historicism," which he describes as "a new mode of historical description furnished by contemporary historical fiction and other imaginative genres," which "constituted a new technology for writing about past events and thinking about their complex relations to present experience" (2). This "new technology" enabled Charles Darwin to *historicize* species, viewing their mutability as unfolding in historical time in order to "disclose new meanings in old words" (226). However, rather than dismissing Erasmus Darwin as a fanciful idealist, Griffiths takes him seriously as "a systems thinker" (78), and argues that exposing his limits "is less a criticism of his work than a recognition of his extraordinary forward-thinking attempt to create the cultural forms that would suit evolutionary models of natural and social life" (55). Erasmus, Griffiths argues, "reformulated Linnaean taxonomy as a process in time" (56) by plotting evolution within an "epic narrative structure" (62) that not only enabled him to "plot natural order in time" but also "erased the Linnaean distinction between the 'natural' order of species and genera and their 'artificial' arrangement in families: all life became one natural family" (63). The problem with Erasmus's model arose from the very genre that enabled it, however: Epic narrative enforced coherence and unity such that "the sweeping cosmic history he described ... came at the expense of a more variegated and sensitive account of the different trajectories of that story's actors—the plants, the stars, and humanity itself" (63). It was only because Charles wrote in the wake of the "comparative synthesis" (2) in the mid-nineteenth century, drawing on narrative models developed in the historical novel, that he was able to articulate the "variegated and sensitive account" that is *On the Origin of Species*. Thus, Charles emerges from this study as not only a theorist of natural selection but also "one of the nineteenth century's most important theorists of the epistemological possibilities of literary form" (228).

In Griffiths's account, the shift in thinking between Erasmus and Charles hinges on the development of new literary forms and genres that in turn disclose new patterns or, more accurately, bring extant patterns into view by disclosing hitherto unseen connections among their

parts. It is thus fitting that, between chapters on the Darwins, we find meticulous, generative, and often surprising readings of Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, and George Eliot. Griffiths unpacks the parallels between the historical novel, geology, antiquarianism, and comparative philology to reveal the comparative impulse at the heart of all Scott's multifarious projects in order to show how the historical novel both "represents history and operates within it" such that the reader becomes "a link between what is known and what is imaginatively made possible" (121). In his reading of Tennyson, the *In Memoriam* stanza becomes an "epistemological engine designed to gather information from both previous experience and new inspiration" (134). Riffing on actor-network-theory, Griffiths argues that Hallam is not merely the *subject* of *In Memoriam*, but also its coauthor, with the poem becoming "a sounding box, an instrument that allows its dead poetic subject to intervene in the act of poetic composition" (132). George Eliot, perhaps Griffiths's ideal interlocutor, provokes some of the book's most ambitious theorization of form, as when "the misalignment of form and content ... gives form a capacity to address new contents and adapt to them" (200) or that "forms have epistemological possibilities" that "can disclose ... other ways of knowing without predetermining their shape" (201). Given that "form" and "species" would become essentially synonymous for Charles Darwin, this discussion becomes the transition back to *On the Origin of Species*, which Griffiths argues "is driven by the problems of abstraction, formalism, and the particular commitment to figurative language" that are hallmarks of Eliot's fiction (210).

"The point is not," Griffiths explains "that Darwin understood *On the Origin of Species* as a novel but, rather, that Darwin's extensive investment in the novel ... inculcated a comparative understanding of the past that emphasized the complexity and indeterminacy of previous events" (235). Turning to the study of orchids that Darwin published immediately after the *Origin*, Griffiths argues that "Darwin's *Orchids* showed how to organize a research program around the hypothesis that natural selection was real" (217). Like a novel, in other words, *Orchids* dramatizes the theory of natural selection in action. In so doing, it enables Griffiths to make a persuasive case for the alignment between literary form and scientific modeling in their capacity to disclose new understandings of the world. "The peculiarity of analogy" within this framework "is that it provides a link between distinct chains of signification" that can "radically reshape apprehension of the world from the ground up" (228). "To recognize the continuities between orchid, animal, and human is to recognize their capacity to engage us, and so to communicate their nature and help write Darwinian science" (243). The result is a newly-ecological, radically-egalitarian Darwin, "more interested in those collaborative engagements through which organisms successfully interact: a three-legged race in place of the 'war of all against all'" (249). This is the Darwin that the world needs now.

The crucial insight offered up by Griffiths's comparative historicism is its contingency, the way it showcases "history as a tense composite rather than an organic whole" that "plays different plots against one another, pluralizing them" (15). "Analogies," in turn, "give voice to patterns that have no name" and thus bring new insights and understandings into being (11). Such turns to the productivity, pluralism, and generative qualities of comparative historicism offer an important rejoinder to critiques of historicism in literary studies, like that mounted in the V21 Collective's Manifesto. Whereas a number of scholars (myself included) have advocated a turn to strategic presentism as a means of bringing the past to bear on the exigencies of the present, Griffiths doubles down on the relevance of comparative historicism in a brief coda on the "novel climates" heralded by climate change, suggesting that climate scientists' challenge of drawing "an analogy between the no-analog future and the no-analog past" is an exercise in "comparative historicism writ large and with the highest possible stakes" (259). On these and many other points, *The Age of Analogy* promises to transform our

understanding of literary and scientific history in the Anthropocene. This is a big, challenging, eloquent book. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Notes on contributor

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