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Genesis, the *Origin*, and Darwin's autobiographies

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In the first paragraph of his "Recollections", Charles Darwin explains, "I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life" (6). As John Sturrock, George Levine, James Olney and Howard Helsing have variously observed, Darwin's self-construction here rhetorically asserts an objectivity and scientific authority that contradict the realities of autobiographical production (the temptation to fictionalize, the deceitfulness of memory, the absurdity of claiming pure empiricism in the interpretation of a life). More than that, in playing revenant, Darwin makes himself out as transcendental and metaphysical: an otherworldly retrospective narrator with a god's-eye view of his life. He claims not just the authority of the uninvolved, but the authority of the immortal.

The authority, objectivity and transcendence of Darwin the autobiographical author are not the authority, objectivity and transcendence of Darwin the autobiographical protagonist, the one whose life is looked back upon. These dual autobiographical roles suggest very nicely Darwin's relationship to God in his autobiographies. He is both the credulous child and the apostate adult. As the dead man looking back, he appropriates the authority and transcendence of God, but as the endearingly fallible young man being looked back upon, he defers to divine authority with sometimes absurd promptitude. In accommodating such different attitudes towards God, Darwin's autobiographies seem by turns to parody and to pay homage to the biblical poetics and narratives they appropriate. For controversy-dodging Charles Darwin, who wrote to botanist and friend, Joseph Dalton Hooker, in March 1863 of having "truckled to public opinion [in the *Origin*], and used the Pentateuchal term of creation" (qtd. in Gillespie, 134), such ambivalence may have been exactly what he wanted.

Yet Darwin's ambivalence is often more than just a truckling to opinion. His autobiographical texts suggest a genuine indecision about his relationship with God. John

Hedley Brooke attacks the standard rendering of Darwin's neatly linear de-conversion, from youthful orthodoxy to middle-aged deism to eventual agnosticism. Brooke writes:

[Darwin] spoke of *fluctuations* of belief. The materialism with which he flirted in the late 1830s, even if sustained, may not have precluded a Christian sensibility of sorts. There were certainly monistic models of mind and body within Unitarianism. ... Much later, when Darwin preferred to think of himself as an agnostic, he still insisted that there were days on which he deserved to be called a theist. (199)

Even without these reversions to theism, the proliferation of Darwin's autobiographical texts – the autobiographical fragment of 1838, the “Recollections” (1876), the *Diary of the Voyage of H. M. S. Beagle* (1831 – 1836) – make tracking his progression from orthodoxy to apostasy, and occasionally part way back again, a very complicated undertaking. Darwin's theory of evolution suggests itself as a metaphor for explaining the variations and developments in his oeuvre; and when looking at the fraction of that oeuvre addressing the writer's life and identity, it suggests itself as an explanation for the variations and developments in the writer himself. John Rosenberg deploys evolutionary metaphors in his analysis of Darwin's life, describing how “the youth who chased beetles ... evolved into the Charles Darwin who forever altered our understanding of nature and of our place within it” and wishing that Darwin had “written more of his own evolution” (84-85). Sturrock identifies the same metaphor at work in the autobiographical self-analysis of the “Recollections”. By interposing himself in narrative between his grandfather and his children, “Darwin imposes an evolutionary perspective, placing himself intermediately, as the living but transient link between the generations of his line”. His “autobiography may be read, as it is written, in broad Darwinian terms” (214-215). For that matter, the slow and selective construction of this autobiography, and of his entire body of texts, can be read in broad Darwinian terms. The exhaustive process of textual variation and selection Darwin undertakes suggests his awareness of the responsibilities of authorship.

Two of the fourteen chapters in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* are devoted exclusively to the question of variation. Indeed, variation occurring through the action of selection, as described in the *Origin*, becomes one of the defining

motifs in that work's own textual history (over three quarters of the first edition's sentences were rewritten). The temptation to apply evolutionary theory to the analysis of textual history, particularly when the texts in question are Darwin's, has a precedent in Darwin's analogical link between the theory of the evolution of species and contemporary theories regarding the formation of language. In *Open Fields*, Gillian Beer observes the obligations of mid-nineteenth-century philology to "evolutionary and organic metaphors" and reciprocally of evolutionary theory to "the new models of language development" (97). Darwin notes in *The Descent of Man* that "The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same" (59). In the *Origin*, Darwin illustrates the genealogical classification of species by "taking the case of languages"(406). Darwin's contemporary, the German philologist Max Müller, claims that "phonetic diversification ... forms the basis of all scientific etymology" (172). He gives an account of the survival of the most pronounceable and refers specifically to "the genius of Darwin" in equipping etymologists with the principles of "*Natural Selection*, or ... *Natural Elimination*" (305). When Darwin claims in the "Recollections" that the Old Testament gives a "manifestly false history of the world", his primary examples are "the Tower of Babel, the rain-bow as a sign, &c., &c" (49). Darwin contests here both the biblical account of species selection (the rainbow signifies a covenant between God and humanity after Noah selects and preserves two of every species) and the biblical account of the creation of variation between languages – the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11: 1-9 he describes as "manifestly false" (49).

Speciation, in turn, can be used to describe the multiplying and dividing of Darwin's autobiographical texts. Darwin wrote a preliminary autobiographical fragment in 1838. Between May and August 1876, he revised this fragment and augmented it to produce the "Recollections", which he again altered in 1878 and 1881, before his death in 1882. The "Recollections" was published in 1887 as the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, edited by his son Francis Darwin, and re-produced with fewer letters in 1892 as *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*. Francis Darwin excised from the "Recollections" much of what his father had to say on his religious beliefs, but in

1958, after several expanded versions, a fully restored edition of the autobiography was produced by Darwin's grand-daughter, Nora Barlow.

Darwin's autobiographical and scientific writings not only reply to the content of Judaeo-Christian creation accounts, but appropriate the metaphors and narrative forms of these accounts. Rosenberg describes the *Origin* as "an epic 'deconstruction' of Genesis in which [Darwin] retells the story of our beginnings" (86). Alongside *The Descent of Man*, the *Origin* has been widely read as a direct reply to the orthodox interpretation of Genesis. Their connection is cemented in the adjective "genetic" – originating in the mid-nineteenth century, and rapidly appropriated by post-Darwinian evolutionary biologists – which follows from the noun "genesis" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "genesis"). The first two chapters of Genesis, offering different versions of the creation, produce – in Hayden White's phrase – the "two orders of events" that "dispose themselves before the story-teller" (4). In presenting variant narratives of Darwin's personal genesis, the autobiographical fragment and the "Recollections" mimic both biological speciation and Genesis' two accounts of creation.

Genesis sets itself up as humanity's *Bildungsroman*. The paradigmatic human is brought into being, then enters into a process of self-discovery that eventuates in an awareness of the limitations imposed on the self. But this "*Bildungsroman*" is divided into two accounts: in Genesis 1 and 2. The first story of humanity's creation occurs in Genesis 1: 26–27 (*King James Version*):

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

The second is in Genesis 2: 7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." The second account of the creation of woman does not occur until 2: 21–22: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and

closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.”

Rather than the two accounts shoring each other up by sheer dint of repetition, their differences threaten the authority of both. David Carr contends that the combination of “parallel and character and contrasting profile” suggest different origins for the materials that furnish each of these chapters (64). How else to explain why these two stories, each self-contained, neither apparently designed in order to facilitate comprehension of the other (in fact, each generating contradictions that problematise comprehension of the other), should exist side by side?

Reading the parallel texts of nature, Darwin is confronted by the same question, and his provisional answers demonstrate just how vacillating and vulnerable is his theology in the face of evident internal inconsistencies. On the 19th January, 1836, in New South Wales, he records this in his *Beagle* Diary:

I had been lying on a sunny bank & was reflecting on the strange character of the Animals of this country as compared with the rest of the World. An unbeliever in everything beyond his own reason, might exclaim ‘Surely two distinct Creators must have been [at] work; their object however has been the same & certainly the end in each case is complete’. (402)

The hypothetical atheist, introduced so that Darwin, who retrospectively professes himself to have been at this stage “quite orthodox” (“Recollections” 49), can abdicate responsibility for the heretical meditations that intrude into his journal, is derided as an egotist, “an unbeliever in everything beyond his own reason”. Because of this disclaimer, however, the view that the two discrete zoological texts, that of New South Wales and that of “the rest of the World”, presuppose “two distinct Creators” (not the singular Creator of orthodox Christianity), is valorised by its association with “reason”. The “reasonable” interpretation of the book of Genesis and the biological genesis that it describes is that there cannot be just the one author or the one stable, singular authority.

Darwin’s heretical reverie on the strange character of New South Wales’ fauna is complicated by a sudden vision of the Fall:

Whilst thus thinking, I observed the conical pitfall of a Lion-Ant: – A fly fell in & immediately disappeared; then came a large but unwary Ant; his struggles to escape being very violent, the little jets of sand described by Kirby (Vol. I. p. 425) were promptly directed against him. His fate however was better than that of the poor fly's: – Without a doubt this predacious Larva belongs to the same genus, but to a different species from the European one. – Now what would the Disbeliever say to this? Would any two workmen ever hit on so beautiful, so simple & yet so artificial a contrivance? It cannot be thought so. – The one hand has surely worked throughout the universe. A Geologist perhaps would suggest, that the periods of Creation have been distinct & remote the one from the other; that the Creator rested in his labor. – (402-403)

So speaks the “quite orthodox” Darwin, the Darwin who is not yet an evolutionary theorist. The divine workman has been afoot, but also, the diarist has to acknowledge, by means this time of a hypothetical Geologist, “the periods of Creation have been distinct & remote the one from the other”. At the point he concludes his journal-keeping for the 19th January 1836, Darwin would not have us attribute the contrasts between the parallel accounts of Genesis to a multiple authorship and different origins, but, rather, to a Creator who takes rests. Darwin posits a continuity in the author's identity, even when the author's effects are so disparate.

Beyond his retention of the two manuscripts, there is no reason to suppose that Darwin hoped for the autobiographical fragment and the “Recollections” to be read together. But as his granddaughter and editor (Nora Barlow) ensured that they could be, perhaps we are to read the parallel autobiographical accounts of Darwin's youth, one written in 1838, one in 1876 – as the work of a Creator who rested in his labour and produced two similar but discrete species.

The autobiographical fragment of 1838 begins with this sentence:

My earliest recollection, the date of which I can approximately tell, and which must have been before I was four years old, was when sitting on Caroline's knee in the drawing room, whilst she was cutting an orange

for me, a cow ran by the window which made me jump, so that I received a bad cut, of which I bear the scar to this day. (1)

But in the "Recollections" of 1876, Darwin records that "my earliest recollection goes back only to when I was a few months over four years old, when we went to near Abergele for sea-bathing, and I recollect some events and places there with some little distinctness" (6). Shrewsbury or Abergele, younger than four or a few months over, a cow-induced orange-knife wound or "some events and places": these are the inconsistencies established between the two texts within the first two paragraphs of each. Charles Darwin turned four on the 12th February, 1813. In 1838 he turned twenty-nine, and in 1876, sixty-seven. It seems improbable that, after remembering from early childhood the details of Caroline, a cow and a fruit knife for some twenty-five years, he would then proceed to forget them over the next thirty-eight, particularly as, over that period, he remains in possession of the unpublished 1838 fragment. This is not a case of deficient memory, but deliberate variation.

Similarly, in the fragment, the narrator records how he "invented some great falsehoods about being able to colour crocuses as I liked" (3). In contrast, the "Recollections" discloses:

I told another little boy (I believe it was Leighton, who afterwards became a well-known lichenologist and botanist), that I could produce variously coloured polyanthuses and primroses by watering them with certain coloured fluids, which was of course a monstrous fable, and had never been tried by me. (7)

Here is a history of wilful fiction-mongering, exemplified in the very act of writing the history. While the child Darwin claims the ability to re-colour a single species, the adult Darwin effects an even more remarkable metamorphosis: of crocuses into polyanthuses and primroses. Both child and adult – protagonist and author – follow the same alchemical methodology, transmuting fact into fiction. Darwin's tale of youthful mendacity, or creativity, assumes an allegorical quality. He tells one fiction or he tells another. It does not really matter which (unless elaborate species-specific connotations are to be attributed to crocuses and primroses); the meaning here is not

invested in the details of a surface narrative, but in the underlying message that Darwin makes fictions. That message, which brands him as an agent of imaginative creativity, also brands him as an author. The paradox for an autobiographical maker of fictions, however, is that he becomes the fiction as well as being the fiction-writer.

The first creation account in Genesis depicts an omnipotent God who creates a perfect humanity, the second a God who fails in his failed creation. On the one hand, then, the creation is made in the image of its creator; on the other, when it aspires to grasp equality with the creator – by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – it is rejected. Christianity participates in a long tradition of identifying divinity with authority, where this latter bears all the weight of its etymological association with the author. The orthodox Protestantism responsible for Darwin's official religious education is a theology of the word, seeking knowledge of God through the texts which he himself has inspired. God is the prototypical life-writer. The divine injunctions of Genesis – as when “God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1:3) – suggest a phatic creation. Through God's act of speaking, what is spoken comes into being. The Greek word for “creator” is *poiotes*, hence the English “poet”. The creator is the author. When God speaks, something godlike is brought into being. So, given that in autobiography, authorial identity is reified through the act of writing, when Darwin speaks – autobiographically – something Darwinlike is brought into being.

Both of Darwin's contradictory self-portraits can disclose aspects of his identity, if not as protagonist, then as author. As Paul de Man argues, wherever “the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding” – regardless of any other relationship existing between what he writes and its real-world referents – there is something autobiographical; “the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity” (70). The 1838 fragment differs from the “Recollections” all the more dramatically because their differences occur at their points of correspondence. If *any* of Darwin's accounts of childhood story-telling is wholly factual, then only one is. Either an actual Darwin really did tell Leighton that polyanthuses and primroses change colour under the influence of particular liquids, or an actual Darwin told someone about colouring crocuses as he liked, or he did neither. Darwin the child has constructed a fable about some sort of flower, and it is the more inaccurate of the accounts, the one where the

author makes a fable of the fable, in which he most resembles that protagonist. While a divergence at the macroscopic level of two narrativised accounts of the same events should jeopardise the authority of both, in the case of these two autobiographical stories, this divergence is a flaunting of the author's authority: not to represent truth, but to recreate and control it.

Darwin sets himself up in his "Recollections" as a metaphysical figure: the dead man in another world looking back. He defies God's damnation by writing cheerily from the dead and represents himself as godlike. In producing these parallel autobiographical accounts, Darwin re-enacts Genesis' prototypical parallelism. He assumes the position of a Creator who has rested in and resumed his labour. He has produced a textual metaphor for the variation of species. In imitating Genesis' narrative form, demonstrating the wide-ranging applicability of Darwin's philosophy of species, and personally enacting the claims he made in the *Beagle Diary* about the Creator, Darwin's autobiographical parallelism suggests a broad attack on the authority of the Bible and an appropriation of its forms and God's creative role. But none of that changes the fact that the autobiographical parallelism also proves Darwin an unreliable narrator, as prone to discrepancy as Genesis.

Darwin inherits from nineteenth-century Europe's apostatic counter-culture a disbelief in the divine authorship of the Bible, and he contributes to it a disbelief in the divine authorship of the species. As Darwin writes of his own contribution to Victorian apostasy: "The old argument from design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered" ("Recollections" 50). Before the developments of evolutionary theory, the text of nature, the one which Darwin read as he watched the Lion Ant's pitfall, seemed to presuppose the existence of an author. One of the assumptions that sustains autobiography – that an autobiographical text points to an autobiographer – also sustained belief in God, because a creation seemed to imply a creator. Before an autobiography is written, the autobiographer, as autobiographer, does not exist. In the process of writing autobiographically, an authorial identity is discursively reified. The author becomes an authority. The autobiography is the most cogent possible documentary proof of the autobiographer's existence. Darwin subtracts this proof from God and deposes the creator

figure from his chair of authorship, demonstrating that the “text equals text maker” equation is not a logical necessity. In the process of dethroning the authorial God, Darwin also undermines his own status as autobiographical author.

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