

*Darwin's Bards: British and American
Poetry in the Age of Evolution*
by John Holmes

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In writing *Darwin's Bards* John Holmes has produced a forceful, tightly-argued reminder of the challenge that the theory of evolution poses to many of the subjects which literature has marked as its own territory. Whether in poetic meditations on God; in elegy; in the cosmic epic of Milton; in nature poetry; in sonnet and lyric: in all of these humane works poetry has shown how it can fill the world of experience with words that speak to the deepest feelings of men and women struggling with mortality and finite things. However, with the increasing success of science in explaining the world and the utility of technology in altering our relations with material reality, the old views of God, our place in nature, and our views on love and sex have become increasingly unsettled. With the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* the scientific discourse of the evolution of life became completely materialist, without any final teleology, however, Holmes contends that only poetry can really bring this discourse alive and make us fully understand its deepest implications.

Holmes states his critical aim in writing *Darwin's Bards* is to further, from the poetic side, the closer dialogue between science and the arts, however, this immediately creates a problem of audience. Scientists will read the first chapter with some approbation

but may begin to suspect Holmes's sincerity due to the unexplained bias towards E. O. Wilson, described as possessing an unexplained 'characteristic panache' (p.1), his bias against Stephen Jay Gould, and, if they continue reading, they will see these trends working themselves out in the criticism itself. The scientist may also take at face value Holmes's assertion that there is a Darwinian tradition in poetry stemming from our shared Darwinian condition but they should be aware that, from this side of C. P. Snow's 'two cultures', this part of Holmes's thesis is not convincing. In a similar way readers without the necessary scientific background will no doubt come to share Holmes's intellectual excitement in discovering evolutionary theory but they should be wary of a non-scientist's presentation of Darwinian orthodoxy, as well as the use to which it is put in analysing poetry.

Holmes is surely correct in privileging Darwinian theory's cultural influence in the later Victorian era but he needs to work harder than he does here in describing a Darwinian condition which we all experience and that his chosen poets can describe for our emotional solace. The world's disenchantment from the consolations of religion long preceded 1859 and although Darwin's ideas significantly altered the world-view of many of the disenchanted immediately after publication, the ideas themselves still have limited effects on the daily lives of the average person, where the culture we have made for ourselves dominates our thoughts and projects. Holmes must be somewhat aware of this because he begins with the topics of God, death, and humanity's place in nature, topics which normally lie at the margins of our consciousness; troubling enough, but not normally part of daily life. His discussion of the big topics is thought-provoking, and Holmes wields Occam's Razor

against the 'God of the gaps' with some flair but the problem of suffering is by now a rather old philosophical/theological topic that does not really need such an extended treatment. The strange corollary of this is the quick dismissal of theologian Alasdair McGrath's argument with Richard Dawkins (p.77-78) on whether universal suffering seriously affects the argument for God's existence. Holmes neglects even to mention McGrath's substantial scientific background.

In *Darwin's Bards* Thomas Hardy appears throughout and is continually labelled a Darwinian in every manner of attribution. Darwin's influence on Hardy is well-attested but the latter is hardly a Darwinist (not even an Aeschylus-ist), though this is the impression received from Holmes's analyses. From the love poems written to his dead wife, to encounters with animals, to meditations on humanity's place in nature, Hardy is continually referred back to Darwin's influence, often on the most tenuous of relations. This diminishes Hardy and erases his voracious reading, where influences from Spencer, J. S. Mill, Schopenhauer and Feuerbach could easily have been pertinent. A certain straining after a thesis is constantly at work, as well as a sensationalist presentation of nature, the latter stemming surprisingly from a basic mischaracterisation of Darwinian theory.

Darwin was greatly influenced by Malthus's notion of 'struggle' that structured his 1798 'Essay on Population'. Malthus's name is absent from *Darwin's Bards* but Holmes makes use of Malthus via Darwin in order to depict nature as brutal. Unfortunately, this characterisation, which relies on making the predator the emblem of nature, affects, to the detriment of his critical practice, Holmes's analysis of 'Hap', Hardy's poem of cosmic dejection. The meaning of the latter poem is clear enough and Holmes praises its

dignified diction but clutters his analysis with some frankly weird adjectives such as 'brutal', 'harsh', 'spat-out', and 'snarling' (p.82). These attributions audibly creak as the thesis undergoes considerable stretching towards the more exciting realms of the predator. Similar forces are at work in the chapter on death with the discussion of Robinson Jeffers's poem 'Vulture', where the latter's reverie of being consumed by a vulture is supposed to show Jeffers's 'equanimity in the face of death' (p.116). Here again there is a marked propensity for sympathising with the predator, whose predation invokes an animating 'rapture' in the prey. Such equanimity seems rather ghoulish, even perverse, and so atypical that it barely qualifies as a sincere meditation on mortality.

Holmes's nemesis Stephen Jay Gould pointed out in his 2002 magnum opus, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, that Darwin's use of the notion of struggle in his theory was 'metaphorical' and to be used in terms of reproductive success (p.470). Gould also emphasised Darwin's less well-known 1881 work on the formation of vegetable mould through the humble activities of the worm to show Darwin's range of thought and lack of sensationalism (2002, p.94-5). For Holmes to label nature as brutal is a serious fault in basic description and it makes his criticisms of Social Darwinism much less credible. Gould fought the hardening of the Darwinian 'modern synthesis' in recent years against Dawkins's and Daniel Dennett's conspicuous drive towards reductionism in evolutionary theory. In *Darwin's Bards* John Holmes has made a brave attempt to describe a Darwinian tradition in Anglophone poetry but it is biased towards a particular view of Darwinian theory. The definitive treatment of this important topic is still to be written.

Bibliography

Gould, Stephen Jay. 2002. *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*.
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