Another Literary Darwinism

Angus Fletcher

There are, Jonathan Kramnick has remarked, just two problems with literary Darwinism: it isn’t literary and it isn’t Darwinism.1 By allying itself with Evolutionary Psychology, it has not only eliminated most of the nuance from contemporary neo-Darwinism but reduced all literature to stories,2 taking so little account of literary form that it equates “Pleistocene campfire” tales with Mrs. Dalloway (“ALD,” p. 327). This, Kramnick notes, is a shame. A sensitive and open conversation between literary critics and modern biologists might, after all, prove fruitful for both disciplines, and, hoping to salvage the prospect, Kramnick turns in his conclusion to the cognitive studies of literature performed by scholars like Lisa Zunshine, David Herman, and Alan Richardson. Such is the force of his earlier critique, however, that these efforts also seem diminished. After all, as Kramnick points out, cognitive psychology has a rather more “modest” reach than literary Darwinism (“ALD,” p. 347). It offers a useful method for

The author would like to thank Thomas Habinek, Thomas Holden, John Monterosso, Peter Meineck, Ralph Savarese, Blakey Vermeule, the University of Southern California Philosophy Club, the Duke Neurohumanities Group, and the editors of this journal for many fruitful conversations on the way to these ideas.

exploring the subjective aspects of human experience but cannot plumb the massive timescales of evolution or navigate the great diversity of non-human life. And so far from replacing literary Darwinism, cognitive studies continue to beg the question: can literature have its own distinct purpose in a world of natural selection?

Over the following pages, I will suggest that the answer is yes—but only if we find a foundation for literary Darwinism other than Evolutionary Psychology. Whatever we may think of this branch of psychology (and however scientific we may take it to be), it has not, as Kramnick demonstrates (and as critiques by scholars such as Nancy Easterlin affirm), shown itself capable of analyzing literature with the nimbleness necessary to satisfy even sympathetic literary critics. At present, of course, Evolutionary Psychology is so tightly linked to literary Darwinism that the banishing of one would seem to lead inevitably to the exile of the other, and yet, as literary Darwinists have themselves acknowledged, their approach long predates the emergence of Evolutionary Psychology in the 1970s. By returning to literary Darwinism’s earlier history, we can thus preserve its foundation while removing the cause of Kramnick’s concern, and though much of this foundation is entangled with eugenics and other discredited strains of “progressive” evolution, there is one very promising, and now forgotten, form of literary Darwinism that emerged in 1920s Britain. At this time, a group of literati that included Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey enlisted Charles Darwin’s theory as a rejoinder to moral idealism, developing a comic form of biography that followed The Origin of Species in emphasizing the pluralism of life. This new form of biography, in turn, encouraged the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley to frame natural se-

5. See Nancy Easterlin, A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation (Baltimore, 2012), pp. 18–19. Easterlin’s approach, like Blakey Vermeule’s “palpitational method,” calls for using lower-case evolutionary psychology (in the broad sense of modern cognitive research with adaptive implications) as a starting point for imaginative criticism, not as a unifying scientific framework (Blakey Vermeule, Why Do We Care about Literary Characters? [Baltimore, 2011], p. 249).

Angus Fletcher is associate professor of English at The Ohio State University. He is the author of Evolving (2011).
lection as a comedy, softening the tragic overtones of Darwin’s theory and facilitating its mainstream acceptance in the 1930s. In quick succession, Darwinism thus helped reshape literature and literature Darwinism, and, as I will suggest, this historical collaboration offers a model for how the two might continue to partner in the future. Rather than flattening literature into a crude expression of evolutionary biology or reducing Darwinism to an object of cultural poetics, it allows each to support the autonomous character of the other so that natural selection upholds the open-ended pluralism of literature while literature promotes the adaptive potential of Darwin’s theory.

Before Huxley earned his reputation as the champion of the modern evolutionary synthesis, he collaborated with H. G. Wells on The Science of Life (1929). Pitched as a follow-up to Wells’s best-selling The Outline of History, this hefty volume guided its readers through a history of life on earth, only to reveal that the journey was taking them nowhere in particular: “we must give up any idea that evolution is purposeful. It is full of apparent purpose; but this is apparent only, it is not real purpose.”

Given that this assertion was aimed at a mass audience, its strict adherence to Darwin’s nonteleological view of life was remarkable. While the general public had long been willing to accept evolution, they had done so because thinkers such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Herbert Spencer had styled it as a biological march toward perfection. This popular view of evolution celebrated the human species as a triumph of nature, invested life with a progressive (and so possibly divine) design, and implied a better future. Not to mention that (as Marxists wryly noted) it buoyed the material ambitions of the middle class, giving them a natural justification for overthrowing the old aristocracy of fixed species. In contrast, Darwin’s theory denied that there was anything affirming about evolution. Far from establishing humans as the highest animal, it suggested that they were just another brute among the throng, doomed to be replaced by “green slime” or some other brainless mass.


accept that many of Darwin’s initial converts gradually turned away, and, by 1900, the theory of natural selection was in danger of eclipse. That year, the Darwin Medal was awarded to the neo-Lamarckian Ernst Haeckel, and at the time that The Science of Life was published in 1929 Darwin’s denial of teleology had become “a minority viewpoint” in biology textbooks. When Huxley and Wells demanded that their readers accept the purposelessness of evolution, they were thus challenging seventy years of popular resistance; making their demand more remarkable still was the fact that they had themselves been resisters. Huxley had previously asserted that the difference between “Natural Selection,” “Lamarckism,” and “Bergson’s élan vital” was “immaterial,” while Wells had claimed in his Outline of History that evolution had birthed a master race: “what we now call democracy, the boldness of modern scientific inquiry and a universal restlessness, are due to this ‘nomadization’ of civilization . . . a repeated overrunning and refreshment of the originally brunet civilizations by [the] hardier, bolder, free-spirited peoples of the steppes and desert.” Both authors, moreover, had embraced these accounts of evolutionary progress for the same reason that the general public did: they restored the “hope” (as Huxley put it) of a purposeful life. By abandoning progressive evolution to proclaim Darwin’s theories, Huxley and Wells thus not only risked alienating their readership. They also seemed to consign themselves to living in despair.

In fact, however, Huxley and Wells had not given up on endowing life with a sense of purpose. As they noted in the introduction to The Science of Life, they had taken a “literary” approach to the “initiation and organization” of the book (SOL, p. 3). By placing this emphasis on “organization” and “initiation,” they did more than claim literature as a stylistic influence. They suggested that it was the source of their book’s structure and logic for

12. See Peter J. Bowler, The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900 (Baltimore, 1992). This eclipse was stronger among the general public than among professional scientists; see John Holmes, Darwin’s Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 8–10.
being, or, in other words, the source of its design. In doing so, they tacitly shifted the burden of design from nature’s shoulders onto literature, and, while this was a revolutionary move, it was not an unprecedented one. Since Darwin himself, Darwinists had invested their writings on natural selection with a consciously literary design, one drawn in particular from the form of biography. Biography literally meant “the writing of life,” and many nineteenth-century naturalists had found it suited for telling the history of living things. As John James Audubon demonstrated in his aptly titled *Ornithological Biography*, “The Purple Grakle travels very far north. I have found it everywhere during my peregrinations.” The *Ornithological Biography* was a favorite of Darwin’s, and he adopted its autobiographical method for *The Origin of Species*, opening with the line, “When on board H.M.S. ‘Beagle,’ as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts.” Two decades later, T. H. Huxley formalized the association between life writing and evolution when he explained, “evolution, or development, is . . . the history of the steps by which any living being has acquired the . . . characters which distinguish it.” This definition, with its emphasis on the “development” of “character,” could stand as a working description of Victorian biography—no less an authority than Leslie Stephen, the editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, defined biography as the study of “the development of the human character”—and T. H. Huxley in fact directly associates evolution with biography in his following sentence.

When Julian Huxley and Wells announced in *The Science of Life* that they would present the “autobiography” of evolution (SOL, p. 332), they were thus following a well-trodden path. And yet, this does not make their confidence in it any less surprising. After all, whatever the merits of a biographical approach to natural selection, it had failed to convince the general public in the past. What would make it any more successful now? The answer, I would like to suggest, is that biography no longer meant what it had in Darwin’s day. Over the preceding decade, works like Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) had inspired a “remarkable” transformation in life writing that quickly became known as the New Biography.

its name suggests, this style of life writing was self-consciously different, its originality proclaimed in combative statements that portrayed Victorian biography as biased, bulky, and dull. Recent scholars have pointed out that these statements are somewhat misleading. Victorian biography is not guilty of most the sins of which it was accused, nor was the New Biography as innovative as its practitioners declared. And yet, for all this, there was at least one thing new about the New Biography: it was comic. Earlier biographies, of course, had had their share of wit and laughter-winning moments. Samuel Johnson was often droll in his assessments in *Lives of the Poets,* and Boswell, too, could play the humorist: “in truth, from a man so still and so tame, as to be contented to pass many years as the domestick companion of a superannuated lord and lady, conversation worth recording could no more be expected, than from a Chinese mandarin on a chimney-piece.” But this humor was not comic, it was satiric. It assumed a universal standard of good taste, of sensible behavior, of ordinary conduct that was rooted in the nature of things. The traditional biographer, that is, used humor to remind his audience of a greater norm; by inspiring laughter, he was releasing a natural corrective against deviance.

In contrast to Johnson and Boswell, the New Biographers took their lead from comedy. Unlike satire, comedy did not imply a single standard of human behavior. Instead, it had long explored the variety of natural humors, presenting people as an eccentric rabble of divergent personalities. In its original dramatic form, comedy had no governing narrator to bind this divergence, and although comic playwrights attempted at times to inject an authorial point of view, the results were badly received. (For his efforts to create a satiric comedy in *Poetaster,* Ben Jonson was scolded by his Victorian biographer: “We cannot stomach the writer who thus dared to puff.”) Indeed, this resistance to a ruling perspective proved so strong that when comedy was translated into novel form in works like *Tom Jones* (1749), the narrator was not accorded moral omniscience but was given the

25. As Strachey put it: “who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design?” (Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Dr. Arnold, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon* [New York, 1918], p. viii; hereafter abbreviated *EV*).


limitations (and even the humors) of a comic character.\textsuperscript{31} Where satire was normative, comedy thus promoted pluralism, and, in many cases, this pluralism was framed as a practical good. In their diversity, the characters of comedies discovered a common resource, for since the problems of this world were varied, various tools were needed to address them.

This comic pluralism was frequently observed by the New Biographers. Strachey, for example, remarked of Molière:

he looked into the profundities of the soul, and measured those strange forces which brush aside the feeble dictates of human wisdom like gossamer, and lend, by their very lack of compromise, a dignity and almost a nobility to folly. . . . We come near, in the face of [their] majestic absurdity, to a feeling of respect.\textsuperscript{32}

As Strachey sees it, Molière’s comedies do not ridicule their characters’ “strange” divergences. Instead, they lend “a dignity and almost a nobility to folly,” and this comic tolerance so impressed Strachey that he made it the basis of his own approach to biography. \textit{Eminent Victorians} is explicitly plural, focusing on not one individual exemplar but four peculiarly different lives: “an ecclesiastic, an educational authority, a woman of action, and a man of adventure” (\textit{EV}, p. viii). Like Molière’s comedy, moreover, \textit{Eminent Victorians} strives to invest the eccentric behavior of its characters with “a dignity and almost a nobility,” closing with this account of the death of General Gordon:

The man whom they saw die was not a saint but a warrior. With intrepidity, with skill, with desperation, he flew at his enemies. When his pistol was exhausted, he fought on with his sword; he forced his way almost to the bottom of the staircase; and, among a heap of corpses, only succumbed at length to the sheer weight of the multitudes against him. [\textit{EV}, p. 339]

Here, Strachey admits that Gordon was perhaps not a “saint.” But this does not mean he lacked “intrepidity” or “skill.” Nor does it deprive him of his own strange dignity. In “desperation,” Gordon hurls himself forward, struggling in the only way he knows how, and although his methods are inadequate and his behavior folly, he achieves a measure of grandeur in not yielding, remaining true to his character till the end.

By neither eulogizing Gordon nor condemning him, \textit{Eminent Victori-
ans follows Molière in rejecting a clear-cut moral idealism. Instead, it suggests that a character’s limitations can also be strengths, a point that Strachey makes directly in Queen Victoria: “Her truthfulness, her single-mindedness, the vividness of her emotions and her unrestrained expression of them, were the varied forms . . . [of] her sincerity which gave her at once her impressiveness, her charm, and her absurdity. . . . And in truth it was an endearing trait.”33 The same sincerity that makes Victoria seem “absurd” also makes her “endearing,” so it is impossible to purge her folly without also losing her “charm.” Rather than calling for character to be reformed, Strachey thus encourages a tolerant pluralism, and, to further scrub his biographies of a governing perspective, he also takes a page from comic novels such as Tom Jones and turns his biographer-narrator into a character. As depicted in the preface of Eminent Victorians, the biographer stares out at a “vast . . . quantity of information” and decides to “row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity” (EV, p. vii). This portrait of the biographer is a nod to the preface of George Meredith’s The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative, where the narrator prescribes “the Comic Spirit” as the best way to reduce “interminable mile-post piles of matter” to “chosen samples.”34 And just like Meredith’s narrator, Strachey’s biographer is an instantly comic figure. Paddling out onto a “great ocean” with his “little bucket,” he is Lilliputian and eccentric yet nobly bent on changing history.

For such efforts, Strachey’s style of biography was widely recognized as comic: “his sense of comedy is rich and unflagging. . . . Tolerance mellows the brilliance of his exposition.”35 Other New Biographers, moreover, followed Strachey’s example, preserving both his tolerant pluralism and his comic narrator. As Woolf remarks of Harold Nicolson in her essay “The New Biography” (1927):

Mr. Nicolson laughs. He laughs at Lord Curzon; he laughs at the Foreign Office; he laughs at himself. . . . So it would seem as if one of the great distinctions, one of the great advantages, of the new school to which Mr. Nicolson belongs is the lack of pose, humbug, solemnity. They approach their bigwigs fearlessly. They have no fixed scheme of

the universe, no standard of courage or morality to which they insist that he shall conform.\footnote{Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography,” Selected Essays, ed. David Bradshaw (New York, 2008), p. 98.}

The New Biographer knows how to laugh at everyone, even “himself,” and with this destruction of his own authorial “solemnity” he becomes a comic narrator, foreclosing the “fixed scheme of . . . morality” promoted by satiric life writers like Johnson and Boswell. As Woolf was making this assessment, moreover, she was also contributing to the New Biography herself, first with The Common Reader (1925) and then with Orlando: A Biography (1928). In this latter work, the historical lives of the Sackvilles are transformed into a comic romp that encompasses endlessly various personalities—“she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand”—all related by a narrator who intersperses constantly: “(and if it is rambling talk, disconnected, trivial, dull, and sometimes unintelligible, it is the reader’s fault for listening to a lady talking to herself; we only copy her words as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may well be wrong).”\footnote{Woolf, Orlando: A Biography (1928; New York, 1973), pp. 309, 310.} With this, Woolf sums up what was new about the New Biography. Where the old form of life writing, as explained by her father (and Dictionary of National Biography editor) Leslie Stephen, had aimed to sift true character from the “rubbish” of life,\footnote{Stephen, “Biography,” p. 174.} Woolf’s biographer draws no distinction between trash and treasure. Instead, she shows a comic tolerance for it all, adding to the sea of “variety” by voicing her own entirely fallible opinion.

The New Biography’s shift toward comedy was driven by many general forces, from a dislike of Victorian narrow-mindedness to an enthusiasm for literary play, but encouraging them all was Darwin. Both Woolf and Strachey admired the nineteenth-century naturalist; Strachey credited him for debunking moral idealism,\footnote{Strachey traces the decline of religious sentiment in the nineteenth century to “[John Stuart] Mill and Darwin” (Strachey, Queen Victoria, p. 408).} while Woolf had just penned a novel, Mrs. Dalloway (1925), in which the title character is a self-confessed Darwinist who believes “we are a doomed race.”\footnote{Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, ed. David Bradshaw (1925; New York, 2000), p. 66. For discussion, see Christina Alt, Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature (New York, 2010), p. 38.} Woolf and Strachey’s debt to Darwin went deeper than these explicit pronouncements, moreover, perhaps deeper than either of them realized. Like the rest of Bloomsbury,
both were heavily influenced by G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903), which set out an alternative to Victorian morality that hinged on a rejection of Spencer’s evolutionary ethics. Accusing Spencer of falling into a fallacy that “forms no part of Darwin’s scientific theory,” Moore denied that human life was evolving toward a general and unified state of “happiness.” Instead, he accepted Darwin’s profoundly nonteleological account of evolution: “by an alteration in the environment (the gradual cooling of the earth, for example) quite a different species from man, a species which we think infinitely lower, might survive us” (*PE*, p. 99). Moore thus admitted the most disturbing of Darwin’s claims into his *Principia Ethica*, but unlike his Victorian predecessors, he did not see the lack of absolute value as the end of ethics. Instead, he believed that ethics could be plural, focused not on a “sole good,” but on multiple goods: “Great positive goods, it will appear, are so numerous, that any whole, which shall contain them all, must be of vast complexity . . . [making] it difficult, or, humanly speaking, impossible, to decide what is The Ideal” (*PE*, pp. 233, 234). With this rejection of idealism for practical pluralism, Moore aligned himself with Darwin, who took open joy in the “astonishing” “diversity” and “wonderful difference” of everything from orchid blooms to pigeon skulls. As Moore and Darwin realized, life might not be getting any more perfect, but that did not mean that it was not full of good things.

Strachey greeted Moore’s *Principia Ethica* by triumphantly noting that his own “sodomitical” impulses could now be counted as an ethical “good.” Woolf agreed, regretting only that Moore was driven by a “desire to know the truth” that tacitly contradicted his emphasis on diversity. With this critique, she authorized her own turn to the less authoritative method of comic biography, and it is possible that here too she and Strachey owed a minor debt to Moore. The *Principia Ethica* does after all

---

44. For a discussion of Moore’s relationship to Darwin, see Brian Hutchinson, *G. E. Moore’s Ethical Theory: Resistance and Reconciliation* (New York, 2001), pp. 109–10. Moore denied that naturalism was sufficient for ethics, but as Hutchinson notes, his rejection of Spencer led him to arrive, like Darwin, at a version of ethical “tolerance” in which virtue is distributed “across . . . cultures” (p. 171).
conclude by arguing that the highest practical good besides philosophy is “the love of . . . good persons,” a love that Moore roots in “the bodily expressions of character” (PE, pp. 253, 252). Moore, that is, equates ethics with an appreciation of the various kinds of human “character,” a slightly wooden, but nonetheless accurate description of the method of comic biography. But whether Moore’s response to Darwin inspired works like Eminent Victorians and The Common Reader or (as is more likely) simply helped encourage them, it had the effect of investing their comic sensibility with a deeper ethical purpose. Read from the vantage of the Principia Ethica, the New Biography was a tool for marshaling Darwin’s theory against Christian idealism, progressive evolution, and the rest of Victorian morality. Rejecting absolute value for a tolerant pluralism, it translated natural selection into a justification for a comic good.

For Woolf and Strachey, this comic approach was immediately empowering; it allowed them to claim that their unconventional attitudes and sexual desires were not morally deviant but reflected the deep diversity of life itself. As The Science of Life demonstrates, moreover, the tolerant pluralism of the New Biography reached beyond the walks of literature, returning to influence Darwinism. The authors of The Science of Life were both intimately versed in the New Biography. In 1934, Wells penned a work titled An Experiment in Autobiography, which, as the word experiment indicates, was a self-conscious contribution to the New Biography. In keeping with this tradition, Wells frames his “life story” as “a comedy” that is by “nature” neither “altogether pitiful” nor “altogether dignified,” so he not only follows Strachey and Woolf in depicting biography as a comic genre but also shares their precise understanding of comedy: a place of noble but imperfect characters. Huxley, meanwhile, knew Woolf and Strachey personally, meeting them both in 1918 when he visited Garsington Manor with his brother Aldous. There Huxley fell in love with Juliette Baillot, whom he confessed to finding particularly attractive because of the literary education she had acquired from Strachey—“a good knowledge of English as well as French literature. Strachey had helped her with her reading.”

Huxley was thus actively interested in the view of Molière that was finding its way at that very moment into Eminent Victorians, and the example of Strachey’s work was fresh in Huxley’s mind when he sat down to write his own memoirs:

One curious memory remains. . . . We [the twelve-year-old Huxley, his eight-year-old brother Trev, and the Liberal politician John Mor-
ley] had tea at a little village, and here [Morley] recited the whole of one of Browning’s long poems—I think it was “The Ballad of Hervé Ri
el.” Here was another example of the all-round capacities of emi-
nent Victorians. [M, 1:26]

In a little English village, a member of Parliament stands up at tea to recite
a heroic ballad to a pair of young boys, and though this performance must
have seemed terribly impressive at the time, it appears “curious” in retro-
spect: “Here was another example of the all-round capacities of eminent
Victorians.” With this dry remark, the eccentricities of Victorian culture
are laid bare, and yet the tone is not satiric. Instead, it is comically nostal-
gic, a fitting illustration of what Strachey himself intended by the phrase
“eminent Victorians.”

Both Wells and Huxley thus saw comedy as integral to life writing, and
they consciously introduced a comic sensibility into The Science of Life.
Although Wells was too vain to admit to imitating any of his contempo-
raries, he and Huxley agreed to pattern the book’s style after four Victorian
authors: “Dickens, Meredith, T. H. Huxley, Darwin” (M, 1: 65). Huxley
and Wells, in effect, followed the method of New Biography, taking
Darwin and T. H. Huxley’s older form of life writing and supplement-
ing it with a pair of comic novelists. The two novelists they selected,
moreover, were particularly suited for a Darwinian approach to biog-
raphy. Dickens was popular with Darwin himself,51 while Meredith’s
comic spirit was, as we have seen, an important inspiration for Eminent
Victorians.52 And indeed, just as in Strachey’s preface, this spirit leads in
The Science of Life to an instantly comic portrait of the life writers:

Three writers have joined forces in this compilation. . . . The triplex
author claims to be wedded to no creed, associated with no propa-
ganda; he is telling what he believes to be the truth about life. . . . But
no one can get outside himself, and this book . . . will surely be satu-
rated with the personality of its writers . . . each member of the trinity
has been closely watched by his two associates. . . . But they cannot

52. Meredith also took a firmly comic view of Darwinism: “We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote . . . [but] before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail. . . . We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science” (Meredith, The Egoist, p. 3).
escape or even pretend to want to escape from their common preconceptions. [SOL, pp. 3–4]

In these lines, *The Science of Life* admits to being “saturated” with “personality.” In fact, it admits to being saturated with three, one for each of “its writers” (Huxley, Wells, and Wells’s son, G. P. Wells). It then jabs at the moral absolutism of religion by playfully establishing its own “trinity” and concludes with the declaration that the authors “cannot escape or even pretend to want to escape” from their own particular point of view. Just like Strachey’s General Gordon or the biographer of *Orlando*, the authors are victims of their own personality, but they are not embarrassed by this fault. Instead, they embrace it with such unrepentant force that folly is transformed into a sign of character.

From here, *The Science of Life* goes on to describe the action of natural selection in these same comic terms: “The story of Evolution is so often told as a simple progressive unfolding, as a triumphant march from the early creeping life-stuff through fish and theromorph to man . . . [, but] the plot of the drama is not a single thread but a tangled skein of hundreds of threads of which our own is only one” (*SOL*, p. 786). The “story of Evolution,” in other words, is just like *The Science of Life*; many different individuals make up the “drama.” Indeed, this biological pluralism goes all the way down:

The reader has a feeling of single individuality; he or she feels and acts as one; the various parts of his or her body work smoothly and harmoniously together. But he or she is also a community, a vast assemblage of invisibly small cells. These cells are living together and they are controlled and specialized in divers ways for the common good. [SOL, p. 45]

Like Strachey’s Victorian queen, our rule is an illusion, for we are sustained not by our own perfection but by a host of “various” characters. In its naked form, this is a potentially horrifying discovery; gone is the idea of a unified human soul, replaced by a “vast assemblage” of “parts.” Yet in the authors’ telling, the story is not a tragedy, but a comedy. Because we are all “specialized in divers ways,” possessing certain characteristics in abundance but others not at all, we can all come together for “the common good.” As the authors observe, “characters useless by themselves may be useful if they are combined together” (*SOL*, p. 1009).

Where Wells and Huxley had previously felt compelled to believe that life was perfectible, *The Science of Life* thus styles the limits of individual “characters” as an ethical “good.” Leaving behind a normative naturalism,
it maintains the comic belief that “active co-operation” constitutes “the essential drama of human life” (SOL, pp. 1471, 1472). In doing so, it reveals why Wells and Huxley were so confident in their book’s literary design. Their comic form of life writing had provided a hopeful way of framing the directionless diversity of natural selection, addressing the feature of Darwinism that had most alarmed the general public in the past. And, indeed, the result was a popular success. The Science of Life sold hundreds of thousands of copies,53 many to public libraries,54 and was recognized by contemporary reviewers for being “cooperative,” “saturated with personality,” and firmly Darwinist.55

A decade later, Huxley then continued the comic pluralism of The Science of Life in his Evolution: The Modern Synthesis (1942). Along with Theodosius Dobzhansky’s Genetics and the Origin of Species (1937), Huxley’s Evolution has been widely credited for ushering in modern Darwinism,56 but as a glance at the two works reveals, it was Huxley’s alone that promoted a pluralist interpretation of Darwin’s theory. Using population genetics, Dobzhansky showed that there was enough intraspecies variation for natural selection to be the sole mechanism behind evolution,57 yet even as he integrated genetics into the theory of natural selection, he did not reach out to other fields of biology, nor did he acknowledge the profoundly nonteleological quality of natural selection.58 Indeed, he tacitly contradicted both of these wider projects. Because Dobzhansky’s focus was technical, he disagreed vigorously with other biologists, framing difference as a source of conflict, not cooperation.59 Moreover, far from seeing natural selection as a satisfactory explanation for human existence, he took a semi-

56. This consensus had been reached within mainstream biology by the time of the International Conference on Genetics, Paleontology, and Evolution, held at Princeton in January 1947. The proceedings from this conference were published as Genetics, Paleontology, and Evolution, ed. Glenn L. Jepsen et al. (Princeton, N.J., 1949).
59. In the preface, Dobzhansky calls his approach “assertive” and “dogmatic” (Theodosius Dobzhansky, Genetics and the Origin of Species [1937; New York, 1982], p. xviii).
religious view of nature, suggesting that a Christian god may have set up evolution so that “pride and egotism” would vanish, allowing the “meek [to] inherit the earth.”

Huxley’s book, in contrast, laid the broad foundation for the pluralist, nonteleological commitments of modern Darwinism, not only connecting the warring subfields of biology into a cooperative partnership, but also firmly accepting that natural selection was without purpose, divine or otherwise: “teleology of adaptation is a pseudo-teleology, capable of being accounted for on good mechanistic principles, without the intervention of purpose, conscious or subconscious, either on the part of the organism or of any outside power.” Just like The Science of Life, moreover, Evolution accomplished these ends by taking a comic approach to life. Huxley began by dryly assuring his readers that Darwinism was still in fact alive: “The death of Darwinism has been proclaimed not only from the pulpit, but from the biological laboratory; but as in the case of Mark Twain, the reports seem to have been greatly exaggerated” (E, p. 22). With this remark, Huxley once again assumes the mantle of a comic biographer. He will be telling the continuing life history of Darwinism, and he will do so in the manner of Twain, balancing his scientific account with an awareness that the “biological laboratory” is no more perfect than the “pulpit.” So it is that his account culminates, not with a scientific utopia, but with the assertion that “human purpose and the progress based upon it must . . . take account of human needs and limitations” (E, p. 577). In an age brimming with eugenicist accounts of human perfectibility, Huxley instead demands that his readers acknowledge their “limitations,” a point he reiterates in the book’s final sentence: “the demonstration of the existence of a general trend which can legitimately be called progress, and the definition of its limitations, will remain as a fundamental contribution of evolutionary biology to human thought” (E, p. 578; emphasis added). Indeed, the terms limit and limitations occur dozens of times in Evolution, applied to everything from scientific theories (see E, p. 170) to human development (see E, p. 512), to the author himself: “I am fully conscious of [my book’s] limitations and imperfections” (E, p. 11). This stance irritated one of Huxley’s early reviewers, who groused about its “moral indignation directed against

the eugenists.” But what *Evolution* expressed was the opposite of “moral” outrage. Far from being idealistic, it simply accepted that no one is perfect.

Just as in *The Science of Life*, moreover, Huxley’s comic approach allowed him to imagine that people’s natural limits could form the basis of an ethical good: cooperation. At the time that *Evolution* appeared, the study of evolution had become highly divisive, leading Huxley’s contemporaries to note the “extreme fragmentation of the biological disciplines as separate sciences, sometimes in such thought-tight compartments that the practitioners engaged in the game of contemptuous attitudes.” To address this situation, Huxley took a firmly pluralist approach:

Contrary to the Weismann school, selection alone has been shown to be incapable of extending the upper limit of variation, and therefore incapable by itself of causing evolutionary change. Contrary to the views of the more extreme mutationists and the believers in orthogenesis, mutation alone has been shown to be incapable of producing directional change, or of overriding selective effects. The two processes are complementary. Their interplay is . . . indispensable. [E, p. 29]

Here, Huxley notes that the Weismann and the mutationist schools each have their own limits. But rather than taking this as a sign that both are failed, he frames them as “complementary.” In doing so, he transforms diversity from a source of conflict into a basis for comedy, encouraging what one contemporary reviewer called “the interdependence of the several sciences.” Or, as another declared, “he has taken many kinds of organisms and created an ecological community.” Where Dobzhansky, like Boswell and Stephen, had felt the need to imagine a greater purpose in nature, Huxley’s comic view of life allowed him to give up idealism and find hope in a practical community of limited characters.

For writing *Evolution*, Huxley was praised by one reviewer for having produced “the outstanding evolutionary treatise of the decade, perhaps of the century.” Another enthused that “no study comparable to this has appeared since Darwin’s *Origin*.” These assessments rather overstate the

---

65. Ibid.
Huxley did not himself bring Darwin’s theory back from the dead, for he could not have begun to write *Evolution* without the efforts of Mayr, Dobzhansky, and hundreds of other biological researchers. Yet though Huxley cannot be credited with resurrecting Darwinism, it is no exaggeration to say that he gave it a place among the living. For earlier generations, the problem with Darwinism had been its lack of practical application. Unlike Louis Pasteur’s germ theory of disease, or William Maxwell’s kinetic theory of gas, there was no way to use natural selection to prevent sickness or build better machines. Indeed, all Darwin’s theory seemed to do was destroy. Ethics, purpose, faith—all were trampled under by natural selection. In this context, the value of Huxley’s literary approach was to demonstrate to scientists and popular readers alike that the blind diversity discovered by Darwin could in fact encourage a joyful, thriving style of life. What seemed a predetermined tragedy could be reframed as a hopeful comedy.

In our own context, moreover, Huxley’s historical achievement has an additional value: it can model a way of practicing literary Darwinism in the future. Although the current crop of literary Darwinists have tended to employ Darwinism as a source of positive claims—for example, that imitation is adaptive or that modern critical theory is an evolutionary byproduct⁶⁹—Huxley reminds us that such claims overlook the purposelessness of natural selection. Darwinism does not allow us to determine that one method of living is “fitter” than another because fit is entirely context dependent, and context is itself both multiple (there are innumerable distinct ecosystems existing simultaneously on this planet) and changing. Rather than offering (as Darwin’s Victorian biographer supposed)⁷⁰ an algorithm for determining evolutionary success, the thrust of Darwinism is therefore primarily negative.⁷¹ Describing a mechanism through which the human race could have come into being without design, it casts doubt on the existence of a greater purpose to life, freeing us to see that what seems pointless or

---


⁷⁰. “Darwin . . . showed, therefore, that each variation affecting the capabilities of a flower for cross-fertilisation must be severely tested in the struggle for life. Formerly we could only surmise that such variations were sifted out by a selective agency of unknown character; now we can show that a selective agency of a definite kind and of measurable strength must be ever at work” (“Darwin,” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Stephen and Sidney Lee, 22 vols. [London, 1908–1909], 5:531).

⁷¹. Or, in other words, it is primarily skeptical, not dogmatic. For an excellent introduction to Darwin’s own method, see Ayala, “Darwin and the Scientific Method,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106 (June 2009): 10033–39.
even detrimental in one time and place can be deeply useful in another. While Darwin’s theory has often been misused as a tautological justification for the fortunate victorious, it thus in fact encourages literary scholars to follow Woolf and Strachey in recognizing the worth of the marginal and defeated. No matter how strange or unscientific we might find a particular text or interpretive act to be, we should preserve it, for it might prove valuable in some situation we cannot foresee.\textsuperscript{72} Nature may impose selection, but Darwinism urges conservation.

Beyond this Darwinian contribution to literary studies, moreover, the exchange between Huxley and New Biography offers a model of what literature can contribute to Darwinism. Once Darwinism finishes its negative move, clearing out God and his substitutes, all that remains in the place of traditional ethics is a hole. There are no religious commandments or categorical imperatives or natural rights or anything else to give a spine to human life. This state of absence, as the Victorians discovered (and more recent thinkers such as Thomas Nagel have lamented),\textsuperscript{73} is unlivable. Because we are participants in a physical world, we must do something, and rather than surrendering us to the blind impulses of nature or the idols of moral idealism Huxley’s literary Darwinism reminds us of a neglected source of practical ethics: behavior. Over the past fifty years, the traditional place of behavior in ethics has been diminished by new trends in both the biological sciences and literary criticism. Within biology, cognitive science has built its reputation on a rejection of behaviorism,\textsuperscript{74} and although there has been a return to Jamesian and Deweyan pragmatism (and even behaviorism itself) in a few quarters,\textsuperscript{75} there remains a bias toward imaging technologies such as fMRIs, which implicitly reduce the brain’s physical function to a semiotic system of representations.\textsuperscript{76} Meanwhile, within literary criticism, the shift away from character has eroded the classical and

\textsuperscript{72} Even if it seems to be menacing other varieties, our goal should simply be to check its incursions. For more discussion of this model of active tolerance, see Fletcher, Evolving Hamlet: Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection (New York, 2011).

\textsuperscript{73} See Thomas Nagel, Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False (New York, 2012). Steven Pinker, Mohan Matthen, and many other scientists and philosophers have observed that Nagel’s effort to debunk Darwinism is unconvincing on scientific grounds. But it nevertheless illustrates how, from the vantage of the mind, there is something unintelligible about a world without purpose, for natural selection has invested our minds with a narrative logic that facilitates intentional action by organizing our phenomenal experience into sequences of cause and effect.


\textsuperscript{76} See Geir Overskeid, “They Should Have Thought about the Consequences: The Crisis of Cognitivism and a Second Chance for Behavior Analysis,” Psychological Record 58 (Jan.
renaissance practice of using literature as a space to model, explore, and inculcate new patterns of behavior. These new directions in psychology and literary criticism have been salutary in many ways, but, as Huxley’s use of comedy reveals, there remains a great deal of cash-value in behavior. To begin with, behavior is purely physical, and so it survives Darwinism’s metaphysical purge untouched. Moreover, as the New Biography demonstrates, the behaviors (or to use a more literary term, the practices) encouraged by literature can foster a sense of purpose, meaning, and hope that Darwin’s theory cannot. Such practices are not absolute or prescriptive—the more we explore the diversity of our literary traditions, the more we recover a library of different possibilities—but they do allow us to transition from a theoretical existentialism into a practical experimentalism. Where raw Darwinism carries us to a state of general tolerance, literature can help us seek the practices that allow us to thrive in our own particular fashion.

And, finally, this model of literary Darwinism joins with Kramnick’s closing turn toward cognitive literary studies to suggest a future direction for the empirical study of literature. If Darwinism leads toward a negative approach to ethics, and if literature’s role in this ethics is behavioral, then a major focus of literary Darwinism will be to identify literary forms that increase our ethical range by inhibiting intolerant behaviors. Many such behaviors originate in what seem to be permanent features of our brains: our emotional egoism, for example, or our diminished empathy for people of a different phenotype. Nevertheless, these behaviors can be reined in by other areas of our cortex, and if literature could uniquely facilitate such reining in, then it could be claimed as a Darwinian remedy for some of the antipluralist outcomes of natural selection. As one example of how this might work, I have conducted a recent behavioral study with neuroscience professor John Monterosso of the University of Southern California Brain and Creativity Institute that suggests that Jane Austen’s use of free indirect discourse seems not (as some Evolutionary Psychologists have postulated) to increase our ability to read other minds but instead to help us learn (like

78. For more on how literature, specifically poetry, can help us reframe Darwinism, see Holmes’s excellent Darwin’s Bards.
Emma Woodhouse) to restrain our biological assumption that other people think the way we do.80 Continuing this basic approach, we might explore whether the choroi of Antigone can check the nepotistic bias that has been bred in us by the evolutionary pressures of kin selection; whether the poetry of Gilgamesh can soften the lust for social dominion that we carry from our primate ancestors; whether the style of The Count of Monte Cristo can modulate the revenge-seeking instincts of our amygdalae.81 And whether, in the future, other forms of literature can help us address the innate hostility to strangers that generates our fear of immigration or the god instinct that breeds religious absolutism.82

Where existing cognitive studies of literature have suggested that literature can exploit or improve our existing mental faculties, this behavioral approach to literary Darwinism thus opens the possibility that literary form might liberate us from certain aspects of our evolved nature.83 That is, instead of being a biological adaptation, literature could help us adapt our biology. This possibility is, of course, speculative. To test it would require intensive collaboration between literary scholars and biologists, and, as Kramnick points out, recent literary Darwinists have done little to foster the mutual respect necessary for such cooperation to occur. Yet here again, Huxley can offer us hope. Rather than displaying a “literary . . . resistance to biology,”84 his version of literary Darwinism clears away Lamarckism, vitalism, and other forms of pseudoscience. And rather than reducing literature to Pleistocene stories, it shows that works such as Eminent Victorians can encourage original ways to respond to our natural condition. Huxley, in short, makes evolution more Darwinian and life more literary, so, unlike the literary Darwinism that inspires Kramnick’s critique, Huxley’s version does not imply a zero-sum contest between aesthetic and biological value. Instead, it does for Darwinism and literature what it did for the warring subfields of evolutionary biology in the 1940s. Revealing them as partners, it urges them to embrace the comic opportunity of life.

83. For the suggestion that William Wordsworth’s “Simon Lee” might disrupt the politically conservative effects of our brain’s natural narrativity or that D. H. Lawrence’s The Fox might restrain men’s instinct for sexual control, see also Easterlin, A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation, pp. 36–37.