



## ***Autobiologies: Charles Darwin and the Natural History of the Self,***

by Alexis Harley.

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Alexis Harley provides engaging insight into the often convoluted relationship between nineteenth-century evolutionary science and Victorian life-writing. Autobiography and evolution ostensibly share similar traits; both are fascinated by self-origins, for example. However, Harley argues that while there is certainly an overlap between the genres, there is conflict as well, for the “Petri dish” (ix) of autobiography is anything but a straightforward experiment. To illustrate this point, she cleverly employs the trope of an autobiography as a laboratory, whereby the life-writing project becomes a venue for observing the impact of evolution upon the self.

The book is divided into three main sections entitled “Darwin,” “Variations” and “Autobiologies.” Harley’s introduction succinctly surveys the history of autobiography, thus situating her research alongside the traditions of both spiritual autobiography and Victorian secular autobiography. Here she juxtaposes life-writing (i.e. the “story of self-formation”) and natural selection, given both must function with an often unclear future. The former “is pointed directly at the *telos* of the writing present” (10), while the latter “operates with no direction in mind; with no mind, for that matter” (10). Finally, the “Conclusion: After the Victorians” situates Harley’s nineteenth-century project alongside the ongoing interest—and anxiety—enveloping studies of the self today.

Perhaps surprisingly, particularly since the final section includes chapters on Victorian literary giants Oscar Wilde and Alfred Tennyson, I found the first section on Darwin by far the most compelling. Darwin’s approach to nature/nurture where it concerns his own life-writing is complicated at best, and Harley’s handling of Darwin’s struggle to arrange his autobiography around both evolutionary principles *and* Victorian values is particularly well done. These contradictions are most apparent in the first chapter, which explores how Darwin casts his family in his life-writing. For example, his beloved wife Emma scarcely features in an autobiography “addresse[d] to their mutual descendants” (30). Harley suggests that this omission stems from Darwin’s shame over the “constitutional weakness” (29) overshadowing the offspring from this cousin-marriage.

Darwin suffers similar anxieties about his relationship with his father, Robert, which is portrayed as “alternately reverential and subversive” (35). Darwin distances himself from his own father even as he establishes his connection to his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin—a man he never met. This selective association complicates Darwin’s theories of evolutionary inheritance. Moreover, Darwin’s autobiography argues that character is both inborn and formed by individual action (42). The result is tension between Darwin declaring that “I was born a naturalist” (34) while simultaneously pandering to the Victorian love of “the self-made man” (32) who is personally responsible for his own success. Darwin is clearly torn between espousing his own beliefs and adhering to the dominant (i.e. acceptable) cultural ideologies of self-formation (44), and this chapter offers a fascinating glimpse into how he navigates the complexities of organising his life history according to a competing set of standards.

The second section departs from the specific focus on Darwin to engage with the evolutionary theories promoted by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (referred to as Lamarckism) and Ernst Haeckel (recapitulation theory), and use them as tools to analyse the autobiographies of Herbert Spencer and Harriet Martineau. Darwin did not subscribe to the Lamarckian model, which more straightforwardly promoted individual agency, whereas Darwin, as previously discussed, wavered in his views concerning the power of the individual in evolution/s of the self. Harley again highlights the apparent contradictions which crop up in Spencer's and Martineau's life-writing. For Spencer, the strain occurs between "the Protestant work ethic ... [and] evolutionary theory" (108), while for Martineau, there exists a strange tension between insisting upon her own insignificance and penning her own obituary, a move which Harley rightly deems "the very opposite of self-effacement" (121). Harley's over-arching thesis about life-writing as the (aforementioned) proverbial "Petri dish" for proponents of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory demonstrates that inconsistencies linger, even when shifting away from a strictly Darwinian emphasis. Although this section is useful in expanding Harley's argument, it lacks the productive dexterity of her engagement with Darwin elsewhere in the text.

The third section studies the life-writing of Oscar Wilde, Edmund Gosse and Alfred Tennyson to examine how the evolutionary theories unpacked in previous sections influenced Victorian writers. These "*littérateurs*" engaged with principles of evolution in their writing, but they were not evolutionists themselves. Nonetheless, similar inconsistencies emerge. Opposing evolutionary discourses mark Wilde's *De Profundis*, while Edmund Gosse's memoir *Father and Son: a Study of Two Temperaments* manifests a "binary tension" (156) between the two men, wherein the conflict presented is shaped by evolutionary ideas of struggle as leading to either annihilation or enhancement (164). To conclude the section, Harley analyses the Darwinian tendencies in Tennyson's famous elegiac poem *In Memoriam*.

While each chapter can stand alone, they are also deeply interconnected. Or, as Harley describes it, "diverged from a common ancestor. Ancestral traits link distant cousins, and all the cousins, brought together, amount to a family, a genus—a genre, for that matter—which I am calling the autobiography" (20). Throughout Harley's text, life-writing and science challenge and complement one another, thus it is fitting that they ultimately unite in a new term which (by retaining characteristics of each discipline) acknowledges their simultaneously fused yet distinct identities.

Overall, Harley's book offers a well-researched and accessible glimpse into the often contradictory convergence of Victorian life-writing and evolutionary science. It is also a timely addition, given both the recent critical interest in nineteenth-century life-writing and the push for more interdisciplinary academic research. Harley does well to emphasise the fraught overlap between mapping the self and mapping theories of evolution. And yet, despite acknowledging that a scientific approach is essential to the evolutionary theory Harley discusses, some of the lengthier engagements with this methodology—particularly when the argument veers away from Darwin specifically—can seem protracted. As noted above, the book's second section lacks the richness of Harley's productive engagement with the tensions encompassing Darwin himself. Regardless, this text remains, on the whole, a convincing study, which significantly enlarges our understanding of Darwin's staggering impact upon the Victorian age.

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