

Charles Morris Lansley, *Charles Darwin's Debt to the Romantics*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018. Pp. 274. £60. ISBN: 9781787071384.

This book-length study explores the ties of Charles Darwin's works and his thought with Romanticism and Romantic influence. Although the figure of Darwin is habitually associated with the Victorian period, Charles Morris Lansley's book addresses how Darwin's perspectives are rooted in Romantic ideas such as his particular use of different metaphors, his aesthetic approach to imagination, and his objective distance and mechanical point of view on Nature.

Drawing on key works by Darwin (*The Voyage of the Beagle*, *On the Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man*, and the *Notebooks*), Lansley identifies the indebtedness of the major ideas of Darwin to British and European Romantic authors, including William Wordsworth, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Alexander von Humboldt. Across a diverse range of chapters, Lansley's study examines the organic constitution of Nature, Darwin's metaphors linked to Romanticism, the influence of reflection and imagination in Darwin's study and contemplation of Nature, his aesthetic thought and relation with the sublime, as well as Darwin's moral values and their basis.

In his first chapter, Lansley explores Humboldt's perspective on natural unity, which accords with Romantic conceptions of organism, and examines how similar ideas remain prevalent in Darwin's concept of a 'web of affinities' (p. 30). More importantly, this chapter analyses how Humboldt's study of Nature influenced Darwin's own methods. The presence of Wordsworth is also much in evidence in this chapter, especially in relation to Darwin's organic conception of Nature as one reality that unifies the external experience and the inner nature of Man, as well as the conception of Nature as the primal origin for Mankind.

Chapter 2 focuses on Humboldt and his influence on Darwin in terms of the relations between natural aesthetic and law central to Darwinian observations about Nature and its ambiguous forces that produce the processes of natural selection and evolution. These observations, as is taken up in a later chapter, are the source from which can be established a common origin for Man and the natural ground to defend equality between men against slavery. Another key aspect of this chapter is how Darwin's concept of the original unity of Nature provides a base from which to defend equality between men and position selves against slavery.

The aesthetic method of Humboldt that relates emotions and subjective experience with objective data remains central to Chapter 3, because of the particular relation between Humboldt's perspective and Darwin's own imaginative approach to the topic of natural selection in Nature. More significantly, the figure of Goethe offers a model for a Darwinian methodology that incorporates scientific imagination and analogical thought to trace a history of Nature. Chapter 4 explores further these relations between natural observation and subjective approach. Lansley contends that a completely objective and empirical relation with Nature is not possible, because of our own personal reflections that we arrive at when we observe Nature.

What emerges, then, is that 'Reflection' and 'Imagination' are not just essential concepts for our human knowledge of Nature, but also for moral reflection, which is a distinctive human feature that distinguishes us from animals and is the key to building social relations. So, in Chapter 5, Lansley exposes how this view can be seen as a kind of Romantic materialism in close relation to a concrete approach to Nature and human evolution from the common and humble origin of every being.

Retracing the Romantic origins of concepts such as 'Nature' and 'Mind', Chapter 6 consists of a sociological analysis of Darwin's morals and how these ideas developed according to Romanticism can be framed in the Victorian era holding some Victorian values

and rejecting others. Consequently, the figure of Darwin blends together both Romantic and Victorian conceptual paradigms. The concept of ‘Mind’ is at the core of Chapter 7, which explores the evolution of Darwin’s perspective about the development of Man’s Mind. The intersubjective aspect of Mind is explored through Darwin’s works to demonstrate how Darwin’s Romantic imagination is equally rooted in empiricism, since it rises from the experience and observation of Nature by the individual. Chapter 8 reads the poetry of Erasmus Darwin to illustrate how Darwin’s materialism could in fact be influenced by the perspective of his grandfather.

Finally, the end of Lansley’s study takes an unexpected turn and focuses on Darwin’s own legacy. Chapter 9 analyses Ruth Padel’s *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (2012) about Darwin, her great-great grandfather. Her poems recover the figures of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to bring a deeper understanding of Darwin’s connections and intellectual exchanges with Romanticism.

Lansley’s book presents a persuasive case for the connections between Darwin and Romanticism from England and Germany. Lansley’s research constitutes an impressive study, which is genuinely and rewardingly wide-ranging and interdisciplinary in its approach. Exploring the scientific perspective of Darwin, and also his aesthetic and moral ideas, Lansley’s book interrelates organically and perceptively these scientific and literary fields.

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