

From Hope and Fear Set Free: Poets' Responses to Darwin

With the publication of "The Origin of Species" in 1859, the theory of evolution was formally introduced to the world. Over the next decade, it became generally accepted, but the spiritual and philosophical consequences of the theory were disturbing enough to influence the work of many writers, both novelists and poets, as they struggled with the meaning of evolutionary theory to human lives.

Several elements were important components of this meaning. First, evolutionary theory necessarily replaces the idea of permanence with the idea of change, and even chaos. The idea that whole species of animals were continuously coming into existence and becoming extinct obviously contradicts the world view that derives from the idea that a supernatural entity created everything at once or over some limited period of time.

Even more disturbing, accepting the theory of evolution as the explanation for the world we see replaces the idea of a beneficent Creator with that of natural forces that operate without any benevolence or moral goals for their creations. As a corollary, the problem of cruelty in nature and in human life becomes more acute as it becomes harder to believe that suffering is redeemed in some future life. In this setting, could poets speak of the human soul as a unique and valuable entity? Could they see human life as more than an accident and human actions as morally significant?

Different poets answered these questions in a variety of ways. Many of Tennyson's poems, for example, suggest an effort to retain a belief in a traditional God while accepting the role of evolution in the development of species, particularly the human species. One of his poems, which is actually called "By An Evolutionist," posits the inclusion by God of a human soul in the essential animal body and includes an exhortation to "Hold the scepter, Human Soul, and rule thy body of the brute." He chose to see human life as a struggle to rise above the purely animal nature and progress to the future life in which he continued to believe.

Matthew Arnold's poetry, in contrast, suggests the poet's inability to hold both the view of the world that follows from the acceptance of evolutionary theory and the view of traditional Christianity. The classic example of this is his great poem, "Dover Beach," which explicitly and vividly expresses his reactions.

This poem speaks for itself so well I'd rather read it than talk about it.

DOVER BEACH

Arnold in many of his works adopted a stoic philosophy, accepting the lack of certainty in life but asserting the importance of love and ethical behavior despite the absence of supernatural reasons to believe in their importance.

Algernon Swinburne responded to the problem of evolutionary theory in yet another way. Like Arnold, he found it increasingly difficult to believe in a traditional Christianity, but his reaction was both more pantheistic and more hedonistic. Many of his poems reference Greek and Roman themes, like the Chorus from "Atalanta." I want to read a couple of stanzas from this, rather than the whole poem, because Swinburne is rather like pasta Alfredo, luscious in small quantities but capable of becoming overwhelmingly rich in large masses.

ATALANTA

Swinburne also managed to extol and even to exult over the lack of confidence in a future life that accepting the idea that humans were the product of impersonal biological processes led to. The most vivid example of this is "The Garden of Proserpine." Proserpine is another name for Persephone, the Greek goddess who was believed to rule the kingdom of the dead with her consort, Pluto. Again, I want to read just the final stanzas, because it's the most intense and rather beautiful celebration of death that I've ever seen.

PROSERPINE

If time.....

In the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, the fact of evolution has become so widely accepted that it permeates many poets' work without calling attention to itself in the same way. Two examples: Dylan Thomas and Robinson Jeffers.

So, we've looked a bit at the ways in which several poets reacted to the theory of evolution and the consequences of that theory. What might we learn from their reactions?

Even though most of us may be lucky enough to avoid confronting a truth that casts doubt on some of our longest-held and most deeply felt convictions, we are all likely to experience events that cause us to question sincere beliefs and to do so with pain and anxiety. The work of Tennyson, Arnold, and Swinburne teaches us, I think, two things we might want to think of at these times.

First, that there are many ways of adapting and responding to emotional challenges, and that we have at least some ability to choose which strategy we adopt. Although we don't know the details of how different poets developed their own belief systems, it's probably safe to say that they did so at least partly through conscious thought – what we describe in our UU principles as “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

And second, that even painful events can be things that we use to fuel our own creativity. Writing was part of the searching process for these poets. In the same way, we can think about using the energy generated by these emotional and intellectual conflicts to create something of our own. Whether our creative outlet is in writing, performing, or making some form of art (and I would include many forms of expression in this category), we can try to find ways both to express ourselves and to move forward through expression.

In closing, I want to read the last few lines of Darwin's "Origin of Species," because I believe that, although Darwin wrote late in life that he had lost his taste for poetry, he also had poetic impulses, and that he expressed them very beautifully in this paragraph. Like the poets I've been talking about, Darwin was also challenged and disturbed by his own theory, and like them, he too was able to use his struggle to create something memorable.

Last lines of "Origin"