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ANTS AND FAIRIES: THE DEBATE WITH DARWINISM
IN A. S. BYATT'S *MORPHO EUGENIA*

One of the major texts concerned with Darwin's contribution to science and understanding of his work by his contemporaries as well as next generations, is Gillian Beer's critical study *Darwin's Plots*.¹ Beer concentrates mainly on the analysis of Darwin's writings but she also mentions increasing interest in the theory among contemporary British novelists. A. S. Byatt, the author of the highly successful *Possession* (1990) is an example of such a novelist. *Possession* (with its Darwinian elements) has been extensively discussed by critics,² but the issues of Darwin's theory are also dealt with in Byatt's less known novel *Angels and Insects* (1992), a part of which is the concern of this paper. The novel consists of two novellas: *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugal Angel*, which contain different characters and which have different story materials. Though both texts discuss Darwinian questions and are parts of the same novel, they can be read separately.

This paper discusses major Darwinian elements in the animal, vegetable and human world in *Morpho Eugenia*. It analyses the main protagonist as an example of a character fascinated with Darwin's theory. However, it concentrates on narration in particular, as narrational strategies presented

¹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

² See, for example: Chris Walsh, *Postmodern Reflections: A. S. Byatt's Possession*, in: *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands*, ed. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (The Netherlands: Rodopi, 2000), p. 185-194; Ivona Djorievic, "In the Footsteps of Giambattista Vico: Patterns of Significance in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*," *Anglia* 115 (1997): 44-83; Bo Luden, "(Re)educating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's *Dr Copernicus*, Coetzee's *Foe* and Byatt's *Possession*," *Acta Universitas Gothoburgensis* 1999; Boyd Tonkin, "Antonia S. Byatt in Interview," *Anglistik* 10.2 (September 1999): 15-26; John Updike, "Fairy Tales and Paradigms," *The New Yorker* (February 19 and 26, 2001): 216-222.

in the text contribute to the understanding of the main narrator's attitude to Darwinian theory.

At the background of the action the implied author creates an animal and vegetable world which consists of a variety of pre-Darwinian and Darwinian elements. On the one hand, there appears the world of wild nature and the jungle which exists in the dreams and in the memory of the protagonist, William. His childhood dreams, influenced by the reading of some eminent naturalists' works, suggest that the world is fascinating, virgin, challenging but also in a way perfect.³

William's later accounts of the world he finds in the jungle reveal a slightly different picture of it. "The primeval forest out there – the endless sameness of the greenery – the clouds of midgets and mosquitoes – the struggling mass of creepers and undergrowth – often seemed to me the epitome of the amorphous" (21); "the cries of frogs and alligators, the murderous designs of his crew, the monotonous sinister cries of howler monkey" (12); "the unbalancing of his own soul in this green world of vast waste murderous growth and lazily aimless mere existence" (12); or the long description of the Amazons as opposed to the English environment with adjectives like "terrible," "terrifying," "inordinate," "inimical" (30) – all these suggest that the hero's perception of the wilderness might be different from that of Darwin. The world discovered by William is the world of sameness, of such abundance of species that he is no longer able to perceive any of them as "frolicking and joyous," "gaudy" or "chiming" (11). The species lose their unique, individual features becoming a "mass of struggling" (30). Such feelings are not in agreement with his earlier expectations. They are also opposed to Darwin's description of "variation under nature" in the second chapter of *The Origin of Species*.

It cannot be doubted that Darwin's main concern in this chapter is the distinction between species and varieties and how they are formed in the world separated from any modification introduced by people; yet nature here varies, undergoes modification and fascinates the naturalist. Whatever fragment of the chapter is analysed the impression of vitality rather than sameness about nature cannot be avoided.

We have, also, seen that it is the most flourishing and dominant species of the larger genera which on an average vary most; and varieties, as we shall hereafter see, tend to become converted into new and distinct species. The larger genera thus tend to become larger; and throughout nature the forms of life which are now dominant tend to become still more dominant by leaving many modified and dominant descendants.⁴

³ A. S. Byatt, *Angels and Insects* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 11. All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1979), p. 113. All references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Species dominate, larger genera vary, varieties are converted into new forms – it is not a world of sameness; it is a world of competition and change.

Apart from the world of wild, uncivilized nature, there exists in the novel a nature more tamed and at least partly controlled by people. An example of such landscapes can be found when William enters the conservatory (50). He finds here nature designed and modified by humans. Alongside palm trees or flowers there appear wrought-iron grilles, a marble floor, wire baskets. People clearly have tried here to design or shape nature. Darwin mentions the question of shaping nature in order to make it more useful and to satisfy human needs. He declares that nature “gives successive variations [and] man adds them up in certain directions useful to him” (*The Origin of Species* 90).

The nature of the civilized countries seems to be “vigorous,” “brilliantly coloured,” “delicately scented” (50) or raises the image of paradise with “little breeze blowing everywhere” or “fresh air after rain” (30). It is tamed in comparison with the nature of the jungle. It is also, however, present everywhere and often at war with people, an example of which might be the beetles which enter the mansion every night no matter how hard the servants try to get rid of them (74).

On the other hand, the vegetation in the conservatory is described by William as abundant (50), just as was the case with nature in the jungle. However, this time the abundance of nature is not perceived in terms of sameness; in fact, it is opposed to the image of the jungle. It should also not be forgotten that the following opinion about uncivilized and not civilized nature is expressed by William: “And yet *that* is in so many ways the innocent, the unfallen world, the virgin forest, the wild people in the interior who are so unaware of modern ways – modern evils – as our first parents” (30). His words here clearly refer to motifs associated with paradise.

As we can see, the novel points to the variety of the animal and vegetable world. It touches on the problem of human influence on the world and the possibility of shaping it to some extent, which does not contradict Darwin’s theory. On the other hand, the fact that William’s perception of the Amazon after he had visited the place, differs from the one presented by Darwin, cannot be ignored.

Darwinian or pre-Darwinian elements can be traced on the level of the construction of characters as well. The most obvious example is the protagonist, William, who has been fascinated with natural science since his early youth. He observes nature, collects specimens to categorise them and writes journals (10). William is brought up in Christianity but he is unable to accept its explanation of the world; natural science seems to him the only acceptable “clue to the world” (10), the only acceptable method that could “set it all in order” (25).

Being a devoted naturalist, William decides to set out for a cruise to the Amazons and comes back in 1859, the year of the publication of *The Origin of Species*. Though he is still fascinated with natural history, having no money to continue his journeys, he is forced to give them up. His journey changes his attitude to the world. He notices that there exists a difference between nature and people in the jungle and those in the civilized world: "Nothing he did now seemed to happen without this double vision, of things seen and done otherwise, in another world" (7).

On the one hand, there exists the image of the jungle and himself among the wild nature where "velvet brown ladies of doubtful virtue and no virtue" (5) or "hugging couples who then set upon and danced round the one partnerless scapegoat dancer" (7) appear. He remembers his own struggle with wild nature, his loneliness and "determination to survive" (12). On the other hand there is Eugenia, the civilised woman who fascinates him so much, who seems so perfect to him.

He has a sense of dissatisfaction with what nature can offer, for William, even in the jungle, writes journals, which "gives him a taste for poetry" (12), and reads *Paradise Lost* and *Choice Beauties of our Elder Poets* (12). After his return he looks for a kind of reward or perhaps consolation in the civilised world, a world which is based on Christianity (52). William's connection with Christianity is also suggested by his family name. Adamson is clearly connected with Adam,⁵ which reveals that William's Christian roots are important.⁶ William himself, while talking about the jungle, connects it with "the unfallen world" (30) opposed to modern evils. At the same time, although he may not be aware of the fact, he proves how Christian his understanding of human fate is – fate is understood in terms of fall. Darwin perceives the question in a different way. "He offers a new creation myth which challenges the idea of fall, and makes the tree of life and the tree of knowledge one, and central meaning. Moreover, his representation of natural order sways between an optimistic and a pessimistic interpretation: it gives room to both comic and tragic vision" (*Darwin's Plots* 107). The tree of knowledge and the tree of life are made one in Darwin's theory. Therefore eating from the tree of knowledge does not necessarily mean falling from the state of happiness. It is the Christian vision of the world which divides it into the unfallen paradise and the fallen rest. Admitting the division, William proves his strong Christian roots.

⁵ Heidi Hansson, "The Double Voice of Metaphor: A. S. Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 45 (Spring 1999): 463–464.

⁶ Adam is obviously a figure from Jewish as well as Christian tradition, but in the context of the created world of *Morpho Eugenia* (nineteenth-century England) it makes more sense to relate Adam to Christianity.

William's life suggests that he is the character unable to ignore the influence of his Christian upbringing; he is also a man of doubts whose life both admits Darwin's views and puts them into question.

It is important to note that Darwinian elements also appear in the form of a debate with Darwinian principles at the level of narration. They can be observed in the subject matter discussed in different narratives within the text: in William's journals and his book, Matty's story and Harald's sermons, and in the narrational strategies used by the narrators. The text's narration and the attitude to narration that emerges from the text is worth considering in this context.

There is not much of William's journal presented in the text, but at least one fragment can be mentioned. It describes the hero's first reaction to his future wife. Sentences like: "I believe I am a rational being" (13) appear, which might suggest his certainty about many questions in life. But, on the other hand, he asks: "Where am I taking myself? I am writing in almost as high delirium as I experienced then [in the jungle]. Conventional wisdom would be shocked that I even allowed the idea of union with her to enter my mind" (13). He is very uncertain in his journal, he does not know what to do with his life.

As any reader of *The Origin of Species* will realize, Darwin never mentions any emotional aspects of human nature, the state of "the delirium" (13) is not discussed. His work is a scientific explanation of his theory which ignores the emotional or psychological aspect of human nature.

William's book considers one of the major difficulties of the theory of Natural Selection, the question of instinct, especially the slave-making instinct of certain ants. It is important to concentrate on the subject matter before the narration in this fragment is analysed, because the difficulties are discussed by Darwin as well. Darwin calls the problems connected with instinct "grave cases of difficulty" (*The Origin of Species* 222), and the difficulty is hidden behind the fact of the perfection of these instincts. "Can instincts be acquired and modified through natural selection? What shall we say to an instinct as that which leads the bee to make cells, which have practically anticipated the discoveries of profound mathematicians?" (*The Origin of Species* 205–206). It is difficult to believe that such perfect, well organised behaviour could have been achieved in the process of gradual selection and modification, and not just simply created. Darwin tries to comment on the difficulty in his argument.

Darwin considers the question of what instinct really is. He is not able to provide any clear definition, but tries to prove that this "mental quality" is influenced by inheritance and may be acquired in the process of evolution. He declares that he: "has nothing to do with the origin of the primary mental powers, any more than [he has] with that of life itself. We are

concerned only with the diversities of instinct and of the other mental qualities of animals within the same class" (*The Origin of Species* 234). William goes somewhat further in his exploration.

He asks: "How does instinct differ from intelligence?" (111). The question immediately suggests the difference in mental qualities between those of animals and humans, assuming that intelligence is something more, something better developed. William seems not to agree that ants are automata driven by instinct for he declares: "My own inclination is to wish to think of them as individual creatures, full of love, fear, ambition, anxiety, and yet I know also that their whole natures may be changed by changes in the circumstances" (113). Attributing ambition and anxiety to ants may suggest that what we call instinct is a kind of intelligence on the lower level of evolution, that it has something in common with thinking.

His suggestion about instinct is confirmed by the following conclusion: "The terrible idea – terrible to some, terrible, perhaps, to all, at some time or in some form – that we are *biologically predestined* like other creatures, that we differ from them only in inventiveness and the capacity for reflection on our fate – treads softly behind the arrogant judgement that makes of the ant a twitching automaton" (113). The difference, he suggests, between animals and people is not the fact that animals possess instincts and people intelligence, but the fact that they both possess mental qualities but on different levels of evolution.

Such a declaration, on the one hand does not seem to be in disagreement with Darwin's theory. It does not deny the presence of mental qualities in animals and the possibility of their modification. On the other hand, emotions like love, fear, ambition are mentioned by William and never by Darwin. This suggests that William is looking for his own way of understanding the theory of Natural Selection, extending what Darwin writes.

It should also be remembered that William is a rather uncertain narrator. He is an observer who claims he has "no settled opinions to advance, and no wish to convert anyone to [his] own rather uncertain views of things" (92). He is unable to draw any definite conclusions. There appear a lot of questions in his narratives, for example: "Where do the soul and the mind reside in the human body? Or in the heart or in the head?" (113) and "Are these restless and inventive individual *persons* in the society, or are they large and well-fed cells in the centre of the ganglia?" (113). Most of the questions remain unanswered, or, if they are answered, the answers are William's wishes. "My own inclination is to wish to think of them as individual creatures, [...] and yet I know also that their whole natures may be changed by changes in their circumstances" (113). William is well aware of his own inability to find all answers. "These are deep questions, pondered by every generation of philosophers, answered

satisfactorily by none" (113). Even his final conclusion is just a suggestion, there is no certainty about it (113). He is unable to reject the idea definitely but he cannot find undeniable arguments to support his views. William is a man of doubts.

Not only the analysis of the question of instinct but many other elements in William's narrative indicate this uncertainty. William, describing the nuptial flight of the Wood Ants, says that it: "offers a supremely moving example of the inexorable secret work of Natural Selection, so that anyone observing it must be struck by how completely Mr Darwin's ideas might seem to explain it" (102). William is not certain again for he writes that the ideas only "might seem to explain."

The fragment of the narrative about the great Slaving Raid suggests an analogy between ants and the human society. The description of the war between ants with words such as "regiments," "little Napoleons," "invaders," "casualties" (98), recalls wars waged by people. But William again indicates the bitter difference between the ants and people: "They did not, as human soldiers do, rape and pillage, loot and destroy. They came, and saw, and conquered, and achieved their object, and left again" (99). Nature may be cruel but it is not wasteful; it does not destroy for the sake of pure destruction but for the benefit of the species.

William decides to use analogy in his narrative. While asked by Matty about anthropomorphic features of his rhetorical strategy, he answers "I thought that was our intention, in this History" (104). The intention is opposed to Darwin's intention in *The Origin of Species*, though both the character and the scientist use analogy as a tool to explain their ideas. Darwin does not intend to compare other organisms to human beings; his descriptions treat people as a part of nature and they do not attribute any special place to them. He uses analogy in his argument as most scientists do, but it is analogy which does not make human beings more important than any other species. With reference to this Beer notices that: "The activity of making analogies is essential to human perception as much as to argument. Meaning presupposes analogies. It would not be possible to describe a thing which was totally *sui generis*. We understand the new by reference to the already known. We cannot do without comparison" (*Darwin's Plots* 76). Darwin, however, avoids focusing on man more than on any other species in his analogies, which is in contrast to what William does. By comparing the world of animals to the human world, William stresses the importance of the latter. Man is present in William's argument whereas "[m]an is a determining absence in the argument of *The Origin of Species*."⁷

⁷ Gillian Beer, "The Face of Nature": Anthropomorphic Elements in the Language of *The Origin of Species*," in: *Languages of Nature*, ed. Ludmila Jordanova (London: Free Association Books, 1986), p. 212.

The second narrative which appears within the text is Matty's, one of the Alabasters' relatives who lives in their house. Her tale entitled *Things Are Not What They Seem*, is inspired by the same observations of nature as William's book. It is important to note that, on the surface, there appear almost no Darwinian elements in the narrative, though its heroes are often animals and the landscape is described in detail. Nevertheless, the narrative should be discussed in order to understand Byatt's narration and her attitude to the problems presented in the text.

The narrative is a fairy tale with a very certain narrator who is convinced about his/her own wisdom. There appear metaphors which can be interpreted in many ways. The key words to understanding the story are printed in italics. Seth, the main character is enchanted by a "comfortable-looking," "lovely" lady "for all the people" (121), who lives in a beautiful palace and who turns men into animals. When Seth is turned into a swineherd and gets into a lower class than she, she orders him to co-operate "for the sake of the household" (123). The whole situation resembles that of William and Eugenia.

There exist more analogies between Seth and William. Seth has to travel "far and wide, crossing and recrossing the Oceans" (119) and is "cast up on a sandy shore with a few companions" (119). Though Seth starts his voyage "to seek his fortune" (119) and search for bread, and William travels for scientific reasons, the voyage is an obvious analogy to William's biography and to Darwin's biography as well.⁸

The main hero of Matty's story is a man and it is his fate that interests the narrator most. The narrator does not concentrate on any species, variety or society; she focuses on the fate of an individual, on his needs and his will. The question of will is raised while the bad Fairy, Mrs Cottitote Pan Demos, changes Seth and his companions into animals. Their will is to continue the journey, which the Fairy finds ungrateful declaring: "They will not stay, whatever we give them, they will not rest, they *will* sail away" (122). The word *will* is deliberately printed in italics. Seth and his companion's *will* is not taken into consideration, they are forced to do what the bad Fairy wishes and are changed into animals (124). In *The Origin of Species* and in his earlier works, Darwin avoids discussing free will as the feature that distinguishes human beings from the rest of nature. Beer notices that "In *The Descent* he [Darwin] concentrates on the powers of sexual selection: this concentration brings back into discussion the ideas of will and culture which are notably and deliberately excluded in *The Origin*" (*Darwin's Plots* 8). Matty, who could not have been familiar with

⁸ Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*, ed. T. H. Huxley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Charles Darwin, *Listy wybrane* (Warszawa: Prószyński, 1999).

*The Descent*⁹ (because it was written twelve years after *The Origin*), indicates in her tale the problems Darwin's theory faced in those days, problems which Darwin tried to resolve in his later works.

The element of struggle for survival is visible in Matty's narrative. Seth, having been changed into an animal, finds himself in a very difficult situation and decides to struggle in order to escape his captivity. The creature that helps him in the struggle, a Jet-black Ant, does it for rather altruistic reasons. She motivates her help in the following way "I can do a good turn, for you saved my life, even if it was yourself who put it in jeopardy" (125). Darwin does not discuss the question of altruism.

Another example of unnatural (in Darwinian sense) behaviour among animals may be the scene when Seth meets two caterpillars, who in his eyes resemble dragons. Their intention is to frighten, not to hurt Seth, because they are themselves afraid of him (129). In nature the stronger species, caterpillars, do not have to be afraid of the weaker, ants. They are in the fairy tale because the rules that operate in fairy tales are not the same as the scientific rules of natural history.

When Seth is really in trouble, an ant helps him and he meets a woman, Mistress Mouffet. The woman with "large horn-rimmed glasses on a sharp nose" (129), who might be interpreted as Matty, shows him how to escape his present situation. She calls herself "the Recorder of this Garden" (131), in other words, someone who observes and writes the observations down. She points out that people who were not born in the garden "are not subject to the laws of the Garden and will leave it" (130), which might be a kind of invitation for William to leave the Alabasters' house where he no longer feels happy. The way to escape is to find a Fairy and solve her riddle.

It is not impossible to find the answer to the riddle because the Fairy is, according to Miss Mouffet, not only "the source of riddles, but also of answers" (136). But who is the Fairy indeed? She is called by a variety of names, one of them being Kind. She is "all that hath been, and shall be, and [her] veil hath no mortal yet uncovered" (137); she is "the maker of dreams" (138) as well. William answers her riddle "by trusting her" (139). It is not explained who this powerful Fairy is.

Matty chooses a fairy tale for her narrative which differs much from William's narrative with scientific ambitions. The genre she chooses is simpler, though the meaning of the tale is hidden in metaphors. Her intention is to indicate to William truths or possibilities and to make him think them over and look for answers to the questions of his life, not the questions of science. Or perhaps he should look at his life from a less

⁹ Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex," in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Press, 1994).

scientific point of view and notice the possibility of other ways of seeing the world. That would be rather an anti-Darwinian suggestion.

The identity of the Fairy, "the source of answers" in Matty's story turns out to be essential to the understanding of the narrative. She is the Fairy who appears if she is trusted and Seth can find the key to her knowledge simply by trusting her (139). Thanks to her wisdom, his problems are solved. Before the identity of the Fairy is analysed in more detail, Harald's narrative should be considered.

Harald, William's father-in-law, intends to write what he calls "the kind of impossible book" (33) which would support the old theory of Creation while not rejecting Darwin's theory. He writes from the position of church authority on the one hand, quoting Darwin in order to prove that there is space for the Christian God in his theory (83). On the other hand, he is trying to prove that the behaviour of ants can be understood in terms of altruism, which is clearly against the theory of Natural Selection. "If it could be proved," Darwin writes, "that any part of the structure of any one species had been formed for the exclusive good of another species, it would annihilate my theory, for such could not have been produced through natural selection" (*The Origin of Species* 229).

Harold's argument is based not on scientific proof but rather on the psychological needs of human nature. There is nothing about collecting evidence or observing ants' behaviour, but human "Need" of the Creator or human "sense that love is the order of things" (87) form the main line of his argument. He quotes the Bible (83–84) and Tennyson's poetry (87–88) to support his theory and is convinced about his truths. He is certain about his final conclusion. "We are fearfully and wonderfully made, in His Image, father and son, son and father, from generation to generation, in mystery and ordained order" (89).

He seems to be proving that there is space for God in Darwin's theory, but the question is how much can Harald be trusted? He considers the life of ants and finds altruism in their behaviour. But if we bear in mind that Byatt claims to have been prompted to write *Morpho Eugenia* by her vision of Victorian society as an ant heap,¹⁰ we can clearly see that Harald belongs to the chosen ones, not to the workers. One can wonder what is then his right to comment on their behaviour? How much can he really know about their nature?

The main narrator and his/her attitude to Darwinian issues in *Angels and Insects* requires comment. The narrator is a traditional third-person narrator who observes the world around him/her and "records" what he/she perceives. But he/she is also a narrator who introduces other people's stories to the narrative and presents different points of view on

¹⁰ "Interview with A. S. Byatt". *Salon Magazine* 8 (February 2002). <http://www.salon.com/08/departments/litchat.htm>.

the same question. Elements of a fairy tale, the example of which might be Matty's story, can be found in the novel. William, the poor boy without income and family or Eugenia, the beautiful princess, might be understood as fairy tale characters. *Things Are Not What They Seem* and the princess becomes a monster, but then Matty the ugly slave saves the prince. The end of the story suggests that they will live happily ever after.

The elements of a journal or a book with scientific ambitions appear in the text as well. The novel is constructed on the idea of the metaphor of the Victorian mansion compared to an ant heap. The introduction of the metaphor (self-evidently a creative and polysemic way of seeing the world) leaves space for many possible interpretations and makes the main narrator's record to things less objective and less generally applicable than would be the case in a traditional third-person narration. All these elements indicate that the narrator is unable to provide the reader with one clear answer to his/her questions. He/she tries to present the problems inviting the reader to reflect on them, rather than to answer them.

The position of the reader, who, just like the narrator, faces problems and is not provided with answers, requires comment. The reader is no longer in the world of unquestionable texts like the Bible or in the world of certain creators like the early novelists. He/she is in the world of many possible answers even to Darwinian questions. He/she may choose to adopt Harald's attitude to the question and feel the need to believe in a Creator, ignoring any arguments against such belief. He/she may, like William, be a man of doubts, searching and admitting his mistakes. He/she may follow the example of Eugenia and Edgar (William's wife and his incestuous brother-in-law) being satisfied with themselves and never aspiring to anything beyond physical satisfaction. He/she may as well choose the dangerous and unknown voyage for happiness, just as William and Matty do – though still believing in Darwin's theories, not forgetting the lesson about human nature they have learned among the Alabasters.

Finally one can see one more possibility of interpretation which the text offers. Does not the novel with its complex narration, metaphors and lack of definite answers resemble the riddle from Matty's tale and the narrator the Fairy with many names? She would be then "the source of riddles but the source of answers as well," but only for those who trust her. She would be the one who knows that just as there were various correct names for the Fairy, there may be many correct answers to her questions. The main objective of the writer would be to challenge her readers intellectually and invite them to search for their own answers. There is no authority in any narrative – neither in the characters' narratives, nor in the traditional Biblical one, nor even in Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.