

Analogy and Beyond: Darwin and Romanticism

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Whereas perfection in its stasis and completion stands in the way of evolutionary understanding, analogy offers a freer tool for thought, as well as a substantial explanation of the relation of the variety of the present natural world to the long past.

--Gillian Beer,
"Plants, Analogy, and Perfection"

Foreword

For my session of the Measurement Reading Group, I have chosen Joel Faflak's introduction to *Marking Time: Romanticism and Evolution* (2017) and Gillian Beer's chapter, "Plants, Analogy, and Perfection: Loose and Strict Analogies" included in the book. Situated within the larger inquiry framework on the method of counting in the philosophy of science and sociology of science, and on temperature, the metric system, the microscope, the meaning of precision, insurance policies, the measuring of time, risk, and happiness, my topic appears an odd one out: for the essays included in *Marking Time* do not "measure" time with anything close to mathematical formula. But I would argue that the historical account of how we think about the non-human beings affects how we calibrate our position in the environment that we share with nature. The Romantic period has not been considered an obvious era to examine the idea of evolution.

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This book successfully challenges this deep-rooted prejudice and opens up avenues for productive discussion.

“Marking” time connotes the sense of observing the evolution of species and the environment along the temporal process.¹ In other words, time needs to manifest itself in phenomena undergoing change. The essays included in this book examine precursors of ideas that contributed to Darwin’s evolutionary theory in the long nineteenth century. Using species and relations between species as a set of coordinators of temporality, this book points toward something that cannot be measured in the conventional way. This volume collects significant essays, which were first delivered in the international conference on Romanticism and Evolution, held by Western University (then The University of Western Ontario) in 2011. This book, to say the least, marks a new chapter in Romantic studies.

Summary

In the introduction, Faflak reminds us that Romanticism occupies a “liminal” position between the idea of the “great chain of being” and “the rise of modern historiographies” (Faflak 3). The guiding principle of the book is specified as “to mark evolution is also to express, delineate, rationalize, symbolize, idealize, personify the dynamism of time in the process of articulating itself to itself, to mark how time leaves its mark upon time through both the ontogeny of individuals and the phylogeny of species, groups, and history itself” (5). The grand scheme of things is to observe time through the marks on time left by individual entities and by species as a unit. It is paramount to move critical studies of Romanticism forward by revisiting the scene of proto-evolutionary ideas emerging from the preconceived *Zeitgeist*, a notable aspect of which is the organic theory. As Faflak insists, the idea of “the organic form,” such as what Jerome McGann delineates in *Romantic Ideology* (1983), in effect “arrests” the “dynamic play of forces” (Faflak 6), whereas the Romantic evolution “moves toward a unity that encompasses multiteity, yet is aware that exploring the multiteity makes unity problematic, if not impossible” (Faflak 7). The Romantic view of evolution thus contains its own challenge, for it is steeped in the vitality of life that exceeds pre-destined

¹ The title is puzzling to non-native speakers like myself. The *OED* offers a military definition of “marking time” as to march on the spot, without moving forward; (*figurative*) to act routinely, to go through the motions, esp. while awaiting an opportunity for something. But the essays included in this book discuss ideas and manifestations of evolution, which is far from “marching on the spot.” Therefore, I choose not to take the title as derived from the phrase, “marking time,” but rather as “marking” time, “observing” the phenomenon of change through the temporal process.

unity or the argument from design. All in all, Faflak's introduction sets the stage for the subsequent thought-provoking essays.

Gillian Beer in her chapter "Plants, Analogy, and Perfection: Loose and Strict Analogies" elaborates the concept of analogy, fundamental to the studies of nature and humanity, developed by Erasmus Darwin and his grandson Charles. On the one hand, Erasmus Darwin in the Advertisement to *The Loves of the Plants* (1791) specifies his intent to lead "the votaries of Imagination from the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy" (qtd. in Beer 29). Erasmus Darwin, at this point, seems to be content with poetry as illustrating "looser" analogy between humans and plants while his prose notes rely on "stricter" analogy to form philosophical elaboration. Poetry is to pave the way for scientific persuasion. But later in *Zoonomia; or the Laws of Organic Life* (1794-96), he begins to speculate on analogy as intimating a more intimate relationship between man and nature that goes beyond genre distinction: "Is this kind of storge produced by mechanic attraction, or by the sensation of love? The latter opinion is supported by the strongest analogy, because a reproduction of the species is the consequence; and then another organ of sense must be wanted to direct these vegetable amourettes to find each other, one probably analogous to our sense of smell" (qtd. in Beer 32). Beer explains that the sensorium of plants is closely analogous to that of human beings, as a strict, though as yet unmeasured, parallel (Beer 32).

On the other hand, Charles Darwin in his essay "On the Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants" (1865) expresses that the dual roles of analogy as an essential tool and doubtful guide. As Charles Darwin observes, "[t]he whole terminal portion [of the tendril] exhibits a singular habit, which in an animal would be called an instinct; for it continually searches for any little crevice or hole into which to insert itself" (qtd. in Beer 30). Beer notices that in this passage the observer begins to be "part of the activity" with an "intensity" that cannot be matched by our time-lapse photography (31). Charles Darwin thus advances on his grandfather in suggesting that human and plant seem "intertwined" (Beer 31).

Apart from the climbing plants, Charles Darwin shows a keenly sustained interest in coralline, carnivorous plants, especially with their seeming "intent" (Beer 33). But he remains skeptical due to his intensive observation. As Beer points out, in Charles Darwin's copy of *Zoonomia*, Charles marks on his grandfather's views on the "learning" ability of plants, such as ivy, vine, and honeysuckle (Beer 34). Beer helps us to see how Charles Darwin remains skeptical about the Lamarckian implications of "learned," as if the organism can within its

own lifespan learn and hand on to its progeny what has been “learned.” He continues to resist turning analogy into “homology,” which is defined in the *OED* as “correspondence in type of structure (of parts or organs).” As Charles Darwin questions, “Does habit imply having ideas?” Nevertheless, on the examples of mimicry and camouflage in plants, he defends Erasmus Darwin’s observations on the reasoning faculty of wasps (qtd. in Beer 35). Therefore, it is fair to say that Charles Darwin remains unsettled on a unifying prerequisite of analogy between the two terms in comparison.

It is in the context of evolution that we see a major difference between the attitudes adopted by the two Darwins toward analogy. Erasmus Darwin saw analogy as evidence of common descent: “shall we conjecture that one and the same kind of living filament is and has been the cause of all organic life?” Charles Darwin in *Metaphysics* admits that “[a]nalogy would lead me one step further, namely, to the belief that all animals and plants have descended from some one prototype. But analogy may be a deceitful guide” (qtd. in Beer 40). Faflak explains that what sets Charles Darwin apart from his grandfather is his wish to figure out some means that can account for the “vitality” of life that he has observed with such intensity (Faflak 14). Furthermore, Charles Darwin remains fascinated by analogy’s “super-abundance of material” for the “limited coherence” between terms that would “set the mind racing” (Beer 39). Analogy for him serves as an initial prop but eventually becomes interestingly doubtful.

Beer then accounts for the development of the idea of perfection in Charles Darwin’s system, as an optimal example of evolutionary dynamism. Charles Darwin compares the idea of perfection in music and in biology. In music, “[t]here appears to be a perfect gradation from movements of which [one is] partly unconscious to those which with effort can be recollected yet, but one sees instinct, habit.” “Perfect” implies “uninterrupted and without deviation” and evokes “coherence and fullness” (Beer 36). In contrast, “reproduction” in the field of biology produces not simply likeness but difference and divergence for “[n]atural selection tends only to make each organic being as perfect as, or slightly more perfect than, the other inhabitants of the same country with which it has to struggle for existence” (Beer 36). In other words, “perfection here is on a sliding scale and is also severely local” and therefore a “tentative, temporary condition” (Beer 37). Such an understanding of “perfect” helps to clarify his idea of adaptation: “I look at every adaptation, as the surviving one of ten thousand trials—each step being perfect . . . to the then existing conditions” (qtd. in Beer 38).

A New Vein of Thought

The conference and the collection of essays announced a definitive critical paradigm shift from “the organic theory” to a dynamic overview of the Romantic period and of the long nineteenth century literature. I attended the conference in 2011 and have benefited greatly from the insights gleaned both formally and informally. My paper delivered at this conference, “Corinne Enacting Archaeology: Mme de Staël’s Volcano Lover,” did not engage with evolution theory. But since then I have embarked on studies related to the broader area of concern which includes natural history and environmental humanities with a special focus on the role of aesthetics in the Anthropocene. Among the scholars whom I met at the conference, quite a few have inspired me tremendously: to name only a few, Gillian Beer, Richard Sha, Alan Bewell, and Noah Heringman.

In 2014, I invited Alan Bewell to Taiwan. Bewell shared with our colleagues and students thought-provoking ideas from the book he was about to publish, *Natures in Translation* (2016). I have to admit that attending the conference marked a new departure for my research. My focus has gradually shifted from literary history that provides depths of feeling and structure to particular literary works to the history of nature which foregrounds the human-nature entanglement. Since then, I have published two articles on subjects related to natural history: botany (2019) and geology (2021), respectively.

As Richard Holmes makes it clear in the *Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (2008), literature and science have never been estranged from each other in the Romantic period (qtd. in Fafalak 9). The writings of the two Darwins obviously prove this non-differentiation of intellectual fields. They utilize analogy as a tool with which to discover shared patterns and to identify distinct qualities. I would argue that our literary studies also requires that we employ analogy drawn from humanity’s concern with a view to illustrating the knowledge of the physical world.

Beer’s essay deals with a fundamental question: How do we understand the working of nature and explain our findings subsequently, if it is not for analogy? A metadiscourse is necessary, necessarily involving analogy, which allows us to draw ideas from what we are familiar with to explain, in parallel, the phenomenon that is the target of our observation. The concerns of my recent research may be put in this way: How does analogy, being a useful tool of approximation and a treacherous means of understanding, help us to probe into Critical Animal and Critical Plant Studies?

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Afterthought

Coincidentally, this short piece was written at the time when the removal of the *Dalbergia sissoo Roxb* from the courtyard of the College of Liberal Arts of my university sparked discussion. The two sides of the discussion have liberally and literally employed analogy from human experience for their disparate causes. Just as Charles Darwin is fascinated by the capacity of one analogy to generate its opposite to the same discourse, we have seen an array of comparative figures in the discussion which in effect shows how intimately intertwined we have become with the living environment and how it is difficult to unravel the bonds between human interests/sentiments and plant sensorium. Nevertheless, Charles Darwin's willingness to ponder on the limitations and freedom inherent in the very means of our thinking about non-human proponents in our shared environment shall remind us to remain vigilant about our motivations which drive our action while contracting our horizons.

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