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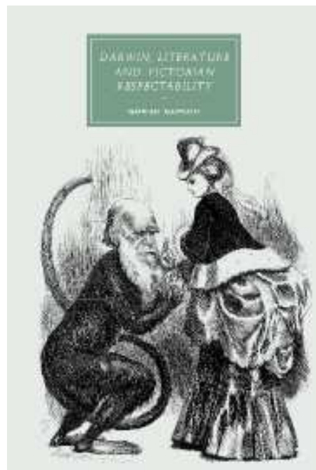

Darwin and the Aesthetes

Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability. Gowan Dawson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 282 pp.

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<1>Gowan Dawson's *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability* is both an important addition to an emerging new wave in the study of Darwin by literary scholars and a significant contribution to the growing literature on aestheticism, gender, and sexuality. The groundbreaking work of Gillian Beer and George Levine in the 1980s ushered in a generation of scholarship that examined both Darwin's own writing and the impact of his theories of natural and sexual selection on Victorian and Edwardian literature, particularly the novel. During that period, however, historians of science were also producing an extraordinarily rich portrait of Victorian natural history that has vastly expanded—and in a number of ways dramatically altered—our understanding of Darwin, his precursors and contemporaries, and the relationship between Victorian science and Victorian culture. As one of the key participants in the Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical project (www.sciper.org) launched by the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield, Dawson is deeply familiar with this historical scholarship and well-versed in the ways science permeated the print culture of the period. Yet he also brings the knowledge of Victorian literature and the critic's sensitivity to the nuances of language that enable him to map a new and fascinating terrain in the borderland between science, literature, and culture, a terrain marked by anxious and often bitter battles over notions of sexuality and respectability. In his focus on the relationship between scientific naturalism and aestheticism, Dawson treats at length and in different ways a topic first touched on by Richard Kaye's *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (2002), and he adds a new element to the scholarship on aestheticism and gender by critics such as Richard Dellamora, Kathy Alexis Psomiades, and Talia Schaffer.

<2>Dawson takes as his subject the efforts of Darwin and his supporters to present the man and his theories, and scientific naturalism more generally, as eminently respectable, free from the taint of political radicalism, atheism, and especially, Dawson argues, sexual impropriety of various kinds. Historians like Janet Browne, Adrian Desmond, James Moore, and James Secord have written extensively about the political and religious positioning of evolutionary theories, but Dawson's special contribution is to highlight the sexual component, and to reveal it as the third leg of a moral stool. He thus focuses much of his attention on the publication and reception of Darwin's *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). The *Descent*, with its evolutionary account of human morals and rather frank (if carefully euphemized and Latinized in certain passages) discussion of human sexuality, opened Darwin to attack and innuendo. That it appeared almost in conjunction with the Paris Commune—the realization for many of all that was wicked in French thinking and French behavior—only heightened the stakes. For Dawson, however, "it was actually Darwin's surprisingly recurrent connection with sexual immorality … which emerged as perhaps the most significant impediment to establishing a naturalistic worldview as a morally acceptable alternative to earlier theological outlooks" (4), not the efforts of opponents to associate his work with unbelief or political radicalism. While the "perhaps" hedges a claim that could otherwise be criticized for overstatement, Dawson clearly demonstrates that Darwin's "connection with sexual immorality" has been badly underappreciated. Darwin's unquestioned respectability as a "gentleman of science," the well-earned reputation of more than thirty years, did not immunize him from aspersions cast against his science or his character. These aspersions often came in the form of associations, both explicit and carefully but clearly coded, to literary aestheticism, especially the poetry of A. C. Swinburne and the criticism and fiction of Walter Pater, controversial works similarly regarded as dangerously immoral. After the *Descent*, Darwin's reputation, and the reputation of the other prominent scientific naturalists

(John Tyndall, W. K. Clifford, and T. H. Huxley), required not just maintenance but strenuous propping up, and not just in opposition from conservative critics.

<3>After an introductory chapter that articulates his arguments and sets the stage, Dawson offers five case studies that, by virtue of some overlap in historical actors and themes, do not stand alone but flesh out a cultural portrait. The first, the book's longest and richest, charts the surprisingly widespread response to the *Descent* as a sexually improper book and the increasingly aggressive counter-attacks by the Darwinians against these accusations. A key and previously overlooked rhetorical feature of the Grundyesque response to Darwin's book, Dawson argues, was its yoking of the *Descent* to Swinburne, already notorious for the polymorphous perversity of his subject matter in *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Despite the self-bowdlerization of his text that muted the evidence of sexual aggression, and especially *female* sexual aggression, amongst humans, Darwin saw his accounts linked to Swinburne's femmes fatales and voluptuous goddesses. Dawson goes on to re-read the many Victorian caricatures of Darwin and evolution that deployed apes, arguing that these, too, reflect anxieties about the unleashing of humanity's bestial sexuality, and connecting them to Victorian pornography. This in turn leads to an examination of Darwin's response to the charge that his work, like that of contemporary anthropologists and ethnographers into the marriage practices of other cultures, encouraged sexual immorality. Re-examining the Darwinians' well-known ostracizing of former ally St. George Mivart, Dawson contends that it was not merely Darwin's personal sense of betrayal by Mivart, but Mivart's insinuations that Darwin and his son, George, were condoning "sexual criminality" (read: prostitution) in their work, that infuriated Darwin and set his own supporters on the attack.

<4>The remaining case studies have less to do with Darwin than with scientific naturalism and its chief public proponents. In the first, Dawson compares the response to John Tyndall's notorious Presidential Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Belfast in 1874 with that to Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Tyndall's Belfast Address, which sent shock waves across British religious culture thanks to its materialist assertion that life is inherent in matter, has been frequently examined by historians, but Dawson takes a fresh view, focusing on Tyndall's invocation of the ancient atomism of Epicurus and Lucretius. Attempting to show that modern scientific theories had ancient and honorable roots, Tyndall unwittingly provided an intellectual genealogy for scientific naturalism that its critics would link to the pagan sensualism and moral corruption of classical Greece and Rome. Not only was this the same line of criticism that had been leveled against Pater's book the previous year, but Tyndall's science and Paterian aestheticism were now yoked together in the discourse of moral panic that flowed from pulpits and the conservative press.

<5>In the chapter that follows, Dawson shifts focus, examining the threat posed not by scientific naturalism's critics, but by the Victorian freethinkers, especially those who advocated free love and birth control, who embraced it. Radicals such as Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, defending themselves from prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, argued that in issuing cheap medical manuals they were merely retailing the same information that elite scientists like Darwin and W. B. Carpenter were publishing. Both Darwin and Carpenter—and through to the end of the century, Huxley—thus assiduously sought to distance themselves and their work from these aggressive, publicity-seeking freethinkers. While some of the evidence that Dawson uses to put Darwin in this story is rather strained, his picture of scientific naturalists having to worry about who was *agreeing* with them adds detail to a position frequently sketched by Desmond and Moore in their biography of Darwin.

<6>With his fifth case study Dawson looks at perhaps the most outspoken of the scientific naturalists, the brilliant mathematician W. K. Clifford, who died at the age of thirty-three in 1879. Clifford had associated himself with the very people, movements, and ideas that Darwin, Tyndall, and Huxley had shunned. His colleagues, and especially Clifford's widow, Lucy, thus expended considerable effort in fashioning and maintaining Clifford's posthumous reputation, expunging and modifying freely, and sanitizing in particular his freethinking opinions on divorce and prostitution. In the final chapter, Dawson traces the efforts of Huxley and the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley towards the end of the century to repudiate and even pathologize aestheticism. Always eager to defend scientific naturalism as moral, Huxley promoted it as the antidote to the effete decadence of aestheticism, which for Maudsley was a sign of social degeneration. Here, too, there is sometimes a tendency to base large inferences on tiny and equivocal bits of evidence, but the portrait, if somewhat impressionistic, is clear and convincing enough.

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<7> Dawson ends his book with a coda arguing that the now-dominant "one culture" model for the study of science and literature makes the assumption that "the interrelations between them are almost always creative and advantageous" (221), and that *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability* gives the lie to this assumption. While I do not accept Dawson's claim about current assumptions in the study of science and literature, I am fully convinced, thanks to this detailed and fascinating study, that the late-nineteenth-century relationship between aestheticism and scientific naturalism was fraught, complex, and often hostile.