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The Joys of Earth: Evolutionary Kinship in Victorian Atheist and Agnostic Authors

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THE JOYS OF EARTH:
EVOLUTIONARY KINSHIP IN VICTORIAN
ATHEIST AND AGNOSTIC AUTHORS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE JOYS OF EARTH: EVOLUTIONARY KINSHIP IN VICTORIAN ATHEIST AND AGNOSTIC AUTHORS

Darwin's evolutionary theory provided, for some atheist and agnostic authors in Victorian England, a theory of kinship and community, of investment in the world, that had been missing before. Without a "creation" story that could match the Biblical version, those who stood outside the dominant Christian paradigm rarely had the words or concepts to construct their own visions of how humans fit into the existence of other species, into landscapes, and into a world that, if unfallen, seemed resistant to other explanations. Those who did construct alternate mythologies usually reared them on a Christian base.

Into the Victorian loss of faith, Darwin's theory irrupted, another crack in the foundation of Christian belief but a living tree for those who could accept its consequences and trace them to their logical ends. Darwin's own beliefs and supporters tended in the agnostic direction; scientific evidence gave a solid, often intensely interesting, fertile ground for the growth of stories that did not have a teleology and rejected transcendence and separation from the animal world. This tension, neither separation nor absolute sameness as other species, but a middle ground, constantly tied in inescapable bonds, at once without traditional comfort and full of the attempts to find a new joy, can be expressed as kinship-in-difference.

These ideas still hold resonance within the modern world, where some refuse to accept that human beings are descended from other species, and with it, refuse to accept that human beings are bounded within the environment of Earth and must suffer from its catastrophes. Fantasies of escape and theological and teleological convictions still flourish in modern nature writing, side-by-side with a conception of unity that breaks down all differences between humans and animals and subsumes them into an amorphous mass. Kinship is a way to rethink the human connection with the environment that offers a mixture of hope, realism, and reevaluation of the science that has shaped so much of our engagement with the world. Victorian atheist and agnostic writers, such as George Eliot, George

Meredith, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, and their convictions, provide one extremely lively and relevant model.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Literature, Darwinian Evolutionary Theory, Atheism and Agnosticism, Ecocriticism, Kinship

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Dedicated to my parents, Debbie and Bob Stevenson,
who encouraged my love of animals;

my friends Dr. Devorah Kennedy, Dr. Rhonda
Smith-Daugherty, and Prof. Megan Burnett,
who encouraged my writing;

and to Dr. Ellen Rosenman, my dissertation director,
who encouraged my thinking.

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Chapter One: Introduction: The Joy of Agnostic Kinship

The Potentially Godless World

To live in a godless or potentially godless world, one in which the answer to questions like “Is there a god?”, “Are humans immortal?”, and “Is there an afterlife?” must be either “No” or “I don’t know,” may be frightening. It can be a source of enough doubt and depression to cause significant stress to those who lose their faith. Yet it can also be a source of significant strength and new opportunities, unconstrained by religious ideas that, even if more honored in the breach than in the observance, linger with disquieting force. Atheist and agnostic writers can, among other things, investigate the closeness of humans to animals without having to decide if both animals and humans have souls, or whether the Christian God really *did* create humans in his image and whether one should decide that the “seven days” allotted for the formation of the world in Genesis should be metaphorically reinterpreted to mean seven geological ages.¹ They can also redefine “animal” to mean something other than “a lower being *not* created in God’s image.” God becomes unnecessary as either bulwark or obstacle. This does not mean an atheist or agnostic author needs to make attacks on religion, but that they can create a literature that exists without it, while existing with animals.

Both this lack of God’s necessity and this new relationship with animals can be found in Darwin’s evolutionary theory, especially as presented in the first edition of *The Origin of Species*. Writing about “the militant atheists, as they have been described,” Peter Watson, a

¹ While many authors outside of the most fundamentalist Christian denominations no longer interpret the Bible literally, of course, allowing the Bible a sort of authority often means engaging in games like this; if one wants to claim that the Bible has ecological wisdom, as American nature writers like Wendell Berry do, then one must also deal, in some way, with the fact that the literal wording does not accord very well with modern science, and what the difference is between the ecological wisdom and the parts that are not useful or in direct conflict with a better relationship between humans and animals. Berry, for example, argues that the command to “subdue the earth” in Genesis 1.28 is “contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible [*sic*]” (525), but to do so he must argue against words that are definitely *in* the Bible.

researcher into the effects of lack of religion on twentieth-century science, art, and philosophy, notes that they “largely occupy a Darwinian position. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, to name only the best known, follow Charles Darwin in seeing human beings as an entirely naturally occurring biological species, which has slowly evolved from “lower” animals...This process has no need of any supernatural entity” (5-6). Some of those who remain theists may add evolutionary theory to their own religious beliefs and strengthen those beliefs in the process. But for atheists and agnostics who accept Darwin’s theory, this mixing is, again, unnecessary. This is a kind of disbelief that means “supernatural understandings” are “displaced...by rational understandings,” ones that “propose more plausible alternatives to religious explanations” (Stephens 27). Stephens includes Darwin among the kind of nonbelievers that contributed to these understandings. In this worldview, kinship to animals, humanity as biological and material instead of spiritually created, humans *as* animals, is a fact, one that cannot be disbelieved in or disputed because there is simply no alternative explanation that makes sense. The question then becomes: What does one do with this fact? What kind of attitudes does it spur?

This dissertation is in part an attempt to answer those questions, based on Darwin’s original evolutionary theory. I am interested in the way that Darwin’s evolutionary theory influenced depictions of animal kinship in novels and poems by agnostic and atheist writers published between 1859 and 1895. This was a particularly propitious time for such writers, both because 1859 marked the appearance of the first edition of *The Origin of Species* and, with it, the clarification of evolutionary thought that had been available before but not in so condensed or so well-argued a form (Beer 146), and because, with such events as Thomas Huxley’s coining of the word “agnostic” in 1869 and acknowledgment by such official

documents as the 1851 census of growing lack of public acts of piety like church attendance (de la L. Oulton 3), atheist and agnostic writers were coming to a greater clarity about what they themselves believed—or did not believe. Social respectability for nonbelievers, if not uncontroversial, also grew during this period. The mentioned lack of church attendance was one sign. Also, by the time that Darwin was famous and had produced several books, even his caution—a caution so extreme that it had caused him to suppress his evolutionary ideas for nearly twenty years—had worn away. Writing in response to a “prying letter,” he stated, “‘I think that generally (& more & more as I grow older), but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.’ Even if, in his clear-headed confusion, he was agnostic about his agnosticism on occasion, in ten years it had become the respectable thing” (Desmond and Moore 636). Victorian agnostics were still more mainstream than Victorian atheists—who were seen as more likely to be revolutionary than “respectable”—but nonbelievers were not hiding in the shadows anymore.

1859 marks a major turning point not only for Darwin but two of the other writers I deal with in this project, George Eliot and George Meredith. Eliot published her first novel (as opposed to shorter work of fiction), *Adam Bede*, and Meredith published his first realist novel, *Richard Feverel* (his work before that had landed in poetry and fantasy). One of Meredith’s biographers, Lionel Stevenson, puts it well when he says that 1859:

was an *annus mirabilis* of English literature. It marked a crucial turning point. The senior authors were at the height of their power...But several epochal books were also put forth in those months by previously obscure writers. Charles Darwin touched the match to the greatest intellectual explosion of the century with *The Origin of Species*. Edward FitzGerald unintentionally made himself the laureate of young skeptics with his translation of Omar Khayyám. And George Eliot came before the public with her first full-fledged novel, *Adam Bede* (60).

While it would take another six years for the last author I deal with—and arguably the true “laureate of young skeptics”—Algernon Charles Swinburne, to publish his first notable work, *Atalanta in Calydon*, 1859 still stands as an important date for both nonbelieving authors and those interested in evolutionary theory.

Darwin’s original theory possesses an advantage for studies of Victorian literature that it does not for studies of modern biology. The modern synthesis between evolutionary theory and Mendelian genetics changed Darwinian theory almost unrecognizably, and additions from modern evolutionary biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould have challenged even such fundamental notions as the functioning of natural selection. Darwin himself did not have an explanation for inherited traits, disdaining the idea of Lamarckism but able to offer only an insufficient theory of “pangenesis” that was not popular with his scientific colleagues in its place (Browne 288). Modern evolutionary biology, then, contains far more concepts than Darwin’s original theory did, in particular the idea of the gene, which he could not have imagined. While these concepts tend to support Darwin’s broad ideas of evolution, they are not the same as the ones Darwin first proposed.

But that original theory is the one to which the authors in my study reacted, with everything from glee to deep distress, at times casual acceptance and at times the fear George Eliot felt, that “the Development theory and all explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.” (cit. on Ashton 31). They might have distrusted or felt saddened by some of the implications, but they accepted them as real. In this they stand out even against some modern thinkers who still try to find a way to deny kinship between humans and animals, let alone some scientists of Darwin’s time who tried the same thing. Henry Gee, an evolutionary

biologist who describes himself as sometimes “quote-mined by idiots” because he has quotes taken out of context by creationists, summarizes both the debate about animal kinship and the side of the acceptors by his statements about human exceptionalism, “the tendency to see human beings as exceptional by virtue of various attributes such as language, technology, or consciousness. There is nothing special about being human, any more than there is anything special about being a guinea pig or a geranium. This insight should allow you to see the world afresh, and marvel at each and every creature as it is, for its innate wonder and uniqueness, not as a way station toward some nebulous, imagined transcendence” (“Preface: No More Missing Links”). Eliot, Meredith, and Swinburne, not to mention Darwin himself, created works filled with the equivalents of guinea pigs and geraniums. They might disagree with Gee that there is nothing special about being human, but they would agree that there is nothing *unique*. Signs of kinship fill their work, binding humans to both metaphorical and real animals, and punishing the characters who insist on separation or separatism. Not only do such separatists spurn animal kinship, as these authors’ first-person or omniscient narrators are quick to point out, but also often human relations; the obverse of human exceptionalism is the insistence that one is exceptional among humans.

In the end, this may be the best reason to study animal kinship. Human exceptionalism, also sometimes named “anthropocentrism” by deep ecologists who believe that humans must adopt an ecocentric point-of-view and see ourselves as no more valuable than other species, is not the same thing as the recognition that we are humans, that that is our species, and that we need to acknowledge the limitations (and strengths) of that position among other animals in order to understand our own biases and perceptions. Ecocritic Kate Soper argues that “our attitudes to nature will be ‘anthropocentric’ in certain respects since

there is no way of conceiving our relations to it other than through the mediation of ideas about ourselves” (cit. on Parham 43). We cannot exactly imagine what it is like to be a bat, according to a famous argument by Thomas Nagel, but we *can* let our imaginations roam in the direction of the implications of animal kinship and the possibilities of treating them better or differently than we do in the same way that we can imagine ourselves into other worlds and other lives. Imaginative sympathy with other beings “is a capacity that people possess, and choose to exercise, in varying degrees; the problem of imagining anything resides in the imagining subject not the subject to be imagined, and what is really at issue is our reluctance to acknowledge how little difference there is between the pains of our own zoological existence and those that we inflict on other animals” (Payne 14). We do not demand perfect congruence between our own mind and another human’s in order to say we sympathize with them; why, then, pretend that we must think exactly like a bat, a seabird, or a dog in order to try and understand their lives?

The demand that we do so, that humans cannot empathize with other animals unless we are exactly like them and we can never be exactly like them so we are bound in an endless trajectory/tragedy of non-empathy, is the argument of a different kind of philosophical separatist, one who may fully accept evolution but still sees a gulf between humans and other animal species. The first kind of separatist, represented by creationists and those who think that technology will essentially stop human beings from being animals, might be called “cornucopian” after Greg Garrard’s definition of the term, in saying that capitalism will invent new solutions to environmental problems; that population growth means new brains and new economies; and that scarcity is an economic, not an environmental, problem (17-18). The second sort of separatist I call Edenic, because they

picture humanity as *once* dwelling in an Eden with other animals, and then, after we evolved, culturally or naturally, one of the traditional dividing lines that the first kind of separatists like to use—often the “language, technology, or consciousness” that Gee refers to—we fell. We are now exiled from that Eden by our own “choice” and unable to return, and we cannot relate to nature except to mar, crush, or destroy it. The only pristine natural landscape is where we are not; the only good animal is a non-domesticated one who has no contact with humans.

In fact, for some Edenic extremists, the only good human is one who has stopped being human. Kirkpatrick Sale, a bioregionalism theorist, has argued that the *Homo sapiens* species separates itself from nature by hunting of large animals, domestication of other species, living in groups larger than about fifty, and even language; only if we become what he sees as a nature-respecting species, *Homo erectus*, can we save the planet. Such a view as he presents it rejects evolutionary theory, and not in the sense that it rejects the notion of “progress.” Instead, it rejects the notion of change in species itself. Sale’s fourth chapter in his book *After Eden*, “The Erectus Alternative,” imagines that a modern African hunter-gatherer group, the Mbuti, has not changed their lifestyle or culture in thousands of years; that, for some reason, this sort of lifestyle is the one that *Homo erectus* would have lived, despite other parts of the book arguing that *Homo sapiens* is inevitably a different, worse species than *erectus*; and that somehow we can become a different species by giving up the aspects of *sapiens* behavior that Sale disapproves of and returning to a hunter-gatherer way of life, despite the ignoring of our species identity that this would entail. This is an aggressive stance against kinship, not in the sense of saying that God created humanity in his image and therefore we must be different from the animals because we are a separate creation, but

denying there is anything natural about human beings, and condemning large swathes of humanity to extermination in response². It is, in the end, another form of separatism. The only difference is the moral tendency. While cornucopians say humans are totally different from other animals in positive ways (intelligence, mastery of technology), Edenic separatists say we are totally different from other animals in negative ways (intelligence, mastery of technology). Both find it best to ignore the links between humans and other animals; the moral valence assigned to various traits is the only dividing line.

The Edenic fantasy leads to the fantasy of union—erasing differences between species to become “one” with them and with nature—aided by theism. Edward Abbey, in his memoir and nature polemic *Desert Solitaire*, passes through many sorts of genres and memories, but he never yields the notion of a God in nature, and following the God back to union. Looking out at the Utah desert, he states, “I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself” (5). “[E]ven the categories of scientific description,” one of the major modern Western ways of understanding the natural world, can be set aside, but not God. It is true that pairing God with Medusa in the paragraph quoted above might make one seem as mythical as the other, but this is the only

² Sale does not put it in this fashion, but it is hard to know how to read him otherwise when he is talking about the supposedly Edenic future lifestyle that he believes can alone save the planet. “There would be no complicated measures to keep people alive when terminally ill or injured; no second thoughts about putting to sleep an extraordinarily deformed or deficient baby; no laboratories devoted to creating drugs or technologies to extend a normal life; no institutions to keep people alive when they have lost mental or bodily functions; in short, a return to natural selection” (Chapter 4). There would be also be many “fewer people,” although how that is to be achieved from the current high human population of the planet, he (perhaps prudently) does not say. Sale has essentially arrived at Social Darwinism by another route, and while he invokes the language of natural selection, he ignores the mounting scientific evidence that our “natural” primate cousins practice plenty of altruism, including helping the sick and injured. Humans are such a blot on nature that we will have to forego compassion, helping others, love of children, and attempts to survive even injuries in order to come back into “harmony” with other animals. Such a perspective carries, along with its unscientific assertions, a fairly cold picture of nonhuman animals and their instincts.

mention of Medusa in the book, while Abbey returns to God, circling obsessively around him. He wonders where God is in the desert, and “who the hell is *He*” (230, emphasis in original)? In the same paragraph as the latter question, Abbey then declares that it is “Occam’s razor” to travel “[b]eyond atheism, nontheism. I am not an atheist but an earthiest. Be true to the earth.” If not the monotheistic Christian God, Abbey will find “the gods of river and canyon” (197) and propitiate them; he will think of a spring as “a leafy god” (221), and will acknowledge Navajo Mountain as “home of gods” (227). Abbey’s attempt to experience reality, a non-Arnoldian (because harsher and half-laughing) “thing as it itself it really is,” is structured and overrun by metaphors of gods. To attempt atheism or nontheism is not the simplest solution in this worldview if one wants to sacrifice one’s humanity to attain union, nor the realistic one. Theism is still necessary.

Likewise, Peter Matthiessen, in his *Snow Leopard*, while following the path of Tao and Zen Buddhism rather than Christianity, cannot accept a totally and completely natural and materialist world. His spirituality is different from Abbey’s in historical context and consequences, but it has the same consequences for kinship. Matthiessen mixes the Big Bang and other theories of modern physics with his Buddhism, into the idea that because “The cosmic radiation that is thought to come from the explosion of creation strikes the earth with equal intensity from all directions...[this] suggests either that the earth is at the center of creation, as in our innocence we once supposed, or that the known universe has no center” (61). The heliocentric modern idea of the solar system matters little against the “mystical vision[;] the universe, its center, and its origins are simultaneous, all around us, all within us, and all One” (Matthiessen 61). This is union with nature at its most extreme, not only mystical but *undifferentiated*, without relation or relationship because there is only one

Thought, Being, Self. Relationship across time collapses into the simultaneous moment, space and place become the One, the landscape ceases to matter as the snow-covered Himalayas that Matthiessen is trekking through or the desert that Abbey explores. The One may proscribe union, but it forbids kinship. Peace, in particular the inner spiritual peace of one individual, matters more than the acknowledgment of different species.

Yet some ecocritics, those who study “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” and take an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty xviii), if not always nature writing authors like Abbey, have come to accept that this lack of differentiation and yearning to return to a primal state of nature are not helpful to the ultimate goal of either acknowledging or protecting other species. David Shumaway, arguing for an inclusion of apartment pets in conceptions of “nature,” points out that “The traditional nature/culture opposition has removed human beings from nature by placing them in a separate metaphysical category by virtue of their having souls and/or rationality.

Environmentalism need not deny that humans and other animals differ in significant ways, but it cannot afford an absolute distinction” (256). Edenic separation, or the idea that it is possible to escape differences between humans and animals by meditating on abstract ideals like Oneness, ultimately plays into the hands of cornucopian separatists who see no need to set aside wilderness areas for future preservation or work on limiting human exploitation of resources if humans are so different from animals that they can have nothing in common with other species *anyway* (Shumaway 256). Then the conflict of human and animal interests becomes a war, and whether one wishes to see other species cleared away to make space for human growth or human growth fenced off, with only solitary journeys into carefully selected pristine wildernesses providing a model for engagement with our animal kin, the

result is ultimately the same. “Absolute distinction” is ruin for both humans and other animals. And, with Darwinian kinship providing at least one model for careful engagement, it is also unnecessary. The options are not uncontrolled capitalism or primitive living with everything that makes humans “unnatural” removed, faith in “souls and/or rationality” as setting us apart from non-humans or meditation on God convincing us that an earth-centered religion is the only, simple answer. The options are manifold, layered along a spectrum of what I call *kinship-in-difference*.

Kinship-in-Difference

While Darwinian kinship is hardly free of problematic elements,³ it does offer a way out of the trap that the two kinds of separatism create between them. Not only, but first, by use of words like “community,” “kinship,” “web,” and “ties,” it indicates a simple truth that separatists tend to ignore. Human beings are *not* simply free to transcend (either the earth or the limitations of their own minds). Even Edenic separatism insists on human freedom, although it does so to mourn it; Donna Haraway, describing those who have fantasized her rape because she is not ecofeminist *enough*, calls such separatists “well marinated in the institutionalized, long dominant Western fantasy that all that is fully human is fallen from Eden, separated from the mother, in the domain of the artificial, deracinated, alienated, and therefore free” (11). This can also be called “human exceptionalism...the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies” (Haraway 11). While human exceptionalism can belong to the cornucopian kind of separatism, too, in the form of declarations that human brains, reason, language, or whatever the bright dividing

³ Among them are the anthropocentric bias to Darwin’s language noted by Gillian Beer, despite his attempts to remove telos completely; what Susan David Bernstein has called the “muting” and “diluting” of both female humans’ and female non-human animals’ voices and power in sexual selection (66); and the way that ideas like “survival of the fittest” are so easily twisted into Social Darwinism, eugenics, and justifications for not helping the poor because then they will only survive to have less fit children.

line is today are too “special” to have evolved without God’s help, in the case Haraway describes it is employed to shove other species away in the name of declaring that humans do not stand akin to anyone else. The dividing line makes us not only alien but alienated, by birth. A strange kind of freedom, and one that cannot exist in Darwinian kinship of any sort, even kinship-in-difference, the first premise of which is that humans, *by birth*, are part of the “spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies.” There is no special divinely-granted spiritual destiny for humans, and there is no exile of them because of environmental sins so that they are no longer tied to other animals, unless one is going to decide that other animals are also capable of such sins. This inescapability can be raged against or accepted with resignation or despair as well as investigated with Darwin’s fascination, but it is there. Denial of it involves denial of evolutionary theory.

Denying evolutionary theory for its problematic aspects is what some ecocritical theory, including some ecofeminist strains, wishes to do. “Evolutionary theory” is one of the attitudes that Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva see as antagonistic, dualistic, life-destroying. (Others are “reductive science” and “Hegelian and Marxist” thought (5)). Mies and Shiva see Darwin as ignoring “the symbioses, the interconnections that nurture and sustain life,” in favor of “constant warfare” (6). That even warfare involves connections in Darwin’s world seems to pass unnoticed by these authors; after all, when Darwin invokes competition between species and notes that this fact is “dimly seen or quite misunderstood,” there is no vision in his thought of these species surviving independently of each other. To say

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year (*Origin* 62),

is the farthest thing from saying that the birds could live *without* the insects and the seeds, or that the predators that eat birds are not interconnected with them. There is a productive criticism to be made of Darwin's ideas of competition as warfare, and even more when it comes to the other thinkers who employ Darwin's language in order to justify human warfare as somehow "natural" and therefore just. But the idea that evolutionary theory should be abandoned to have what Mies and Shiva call "the good life" is ridiculous. In fact, Mies and Shiva's idea that "To find freedom does not involve subjugating or transcending the 'realm of necessity', but rather focusing on developing a vision of freedom, happiness, the 'good life' within the limits of necessity, of nature" (8) aligns far more closely with the inescapability of Darwinian kinship than they acknowledge. Darwin's theory remains challenging to (some) ecofeminist ideas, but is not contradictory to them, at least if one understands his ideas in their context rather than in the context of, say, Social Darwinism.

Darwin's theories also add a valuable corrective to the idea that the only way to enjoy kinship with other animals is to collapse all differences into the One, and that only spiritual meditation, combined with sojourns in wilderness or at least in countries that many Westerners find difficult to travel to, will lead one there. While Darwin's theories were often touted in the Victorian period as not requiring someone who accepted them to give up all faith,⁴ Darwin did not *intend* faith and evolutionary theory to be reconcilable (Browne 92), and emphasized carefully that God, Christianity, and special creation were all absolutely non-necessary to his conceptions of natural selection, competition, and slow evolution based on descent through kindred species. Gillian Beer is correct that Darwin's language in both the first edition of *The Origin of Species* and after did not manage to excise all presence of telos

⁴ Charles Kingsley, for example, a well-known theologian who parodied Darwin's defender T. H. Huxley in *The Water-Babies*, also wrote *Glaucus, or the Wonders of the Shore*, a natural history book consumed with pointing out the beauties of sea-creatures washed up on the sand.

or anthropocentrism, mainly by placing “Nature” in the role of God; “He has to put something in the space left by God” (61). But what takes God’s place does not have to be identical to him, or indeed anything close. The concept of the transcendent Christian God exalted Victorian, English humans and placed them in a position comfortably above other animals as well as other classes and groups of humans. Darwinian theory, even if working through a capitalized Nature, did something different; it “suggested that man was not fully equipped to understand the history of life on earth and that he might not be central to that history. He was neither paradigm nor sovereign. Man’s indefatigable zeal in designing explanations of phenomena which would place him at the centre of reference was seen, indeed, by some of the most creative scientists of the period as the major stumbling block to the advance of knowledge” (Beer 14-15). Darwin removed that stumbling block. And he removed, as well, the requirement that “Man” be placed both “at the centre of reference” and beneath God.

Far from encouraging arrogance that a spiritually-minded person may be tempted to suggest would spring up with the removal of God, Darwin encouraged humility. The movement of humans away from the center was just as important as their ability to look at the world without explanations that depended on natural theology. There was now a wide, new perspective, spreading out to new horizons, along new spectrums, and along lineages that no one had suspected were tied in to human lineages before—such as that of the barnacles Darwin studied, the bees he admired, or the dogs he described sympathetically. Humans would still have to design explanations, but they were the sort that would have to take into account kinship. It became harder to claim that humans were superior to animals, and, as such, deserved better treatment than other animals and could do whatever they, the

humans, liked with them. While Christianity (and other kinds of religion) had more aspects than simply the support of humans setting themselves above animals, that aspect was the one that constrained efforts at kinship. With it removed, new sorts of relationships could appear.

Darwin's ideas also unleashed a tremendous force of change and confusion. Daniel Dennett's book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* is well-named. Even if disconnected from actual revolution—arguable in part because of Darwin's middle-class respectability and his anxious attempts to say nothing about human kinship in the first edition of *The Origin*—Darwinian kinship acted as a boundary-blurrer. There were still differences between humans and animals, such as the different ways in which they had evolved their forelimbs (wings in bats and birds, legs in dogs and horses, flippers in seals, arms in humans), but Darwin had undermined many of the traditional ones by showing ways in which animals could have different kinds of reason, intelligence, communication, and so on.⁵ Instead of simply asserting that humans and animals were different because of the way God had made them, and using that as both a basis and a check on exploration, scientists—and other people—would now have to *investigate* the differences, and do it while keeping in mind that humans and animals had not simply appeared ready-made and independent of each other.

Evolution leads to an idea of revolution: the lower classes and animals were now “unruly, eagerly seeking to overturn the structures and disciplines that traditionally bound them” (Michie 145). This explains part of the conservative response to Darwin, the striving by some more traditionally-minded theologians, writers, and even scientists to keep boundaries firm and the “inferior” animals, human as well as domestic or other primates, in their accustomed place. While Alfred Russel Wallace is increasingly considered to deserve

⁵ With religion being unnecessary to Darwin's explanation of kinship, he also undermined, indirectly, the idea that the soul was a dividing line between humans and animals.

co-discoverer credit on the concept of natural selection, he was much more uneasy with the idea that humans could have descended from animals than Darwin was; Darwin published *The Descent of Man* when he did partially because Wallace had declared that spiritual forces had to have separated man from the animals (Browne 319-321). Wallace's chosen dividing line, the soul, was beyond scientific investigation, but Darwin dealt with this partially by shunting it aside and making it clear, in *The Descent*, that religion was both unnecessary to human development—and thus Wallace's "spiritual forces," though less specific than a Christian God, were also unnecessary—and that religion as it stood could have evolved from fears and relationships possible among animals. Even if one evolutionist chose to declare the exceptionalism of humans, Darwinian ideas could still focus on kinship.⁶

In ecocritical theory, too, there is a place for ideas of kinship that focus on shared evolutionary bonds, rather than gendered ones like the bond between women and animals emphasized in ecofeminism, or the religious bond between *one* human and the "All" talked about in some American nature writing. However, that place needs a little explaining. Ecocriticism has not been applied to Victorian literature as often as it has to other periods. Lawrence Buell, tracing the rise of ecocriticism, notes that it was inaugurated (in the U.S.) by the Western American Literature Association (7), and as a result, it has often read American nature writers who explored or lived in the West—Mary Austin, John Muir, Edward Abbey—while also embracing writers of the East and South who are seen as predecessors or modern exemplars—Emerson, Thoreau, William Bartram, Annie Dillard. In the United

⁶ Darwin does still hedge his bets in *The Descent*, separating the idea of gods from a "Creator and Ruler of the universe," and says that "this [question as to whether there is a single God] has been answered in the affirmative by the highest intellects that have ever lived" (63). However, belief in a single God is not inherent to humans, and Darwin also does not describe any part God could have in evolution, leaving his Creator and Ruler with very little to create or rule.

Kingdom, the most frequently ecocritically studied writers, from Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* on, have been Romantic poets, with Wordsworth and John Clare at the forefront. Their apparent closeness to nature makes them suitable candidates for ecocritical study; Karl Kroeber, for example, one early 1990s ecocritic, argues that the Romantics in general were proto-ecological in outlook, and proto-ecology's "basic premise is that human beings are appropriately situated here on earth" (9). To know this, to think this, the Romantics needed to pay attention to the earth, what it looked like, how it felt, how it sounded, what it produced and needed and how it responded to human needs. It is not surprising, then, that studying Romanticism has proven fertile for the soil of British ecocriticism.

But in what Buell calls "second-wave" ecocriticism,⁷ mostly pertaining to books and articles published in the late 90s and in the twenty-first century, ecocritics had already begun to turn away from the usual suspects. In British literature alone, the possibilities have opened up with works like Gabriel Egan's *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006), Deborah Denenholz Morse's and Martin Danahay's edited collection *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2007), Graham Huggin's and Helen Tiffin's anthology *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), and John Holmes's *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (2013). The titles and scope of none of these works forbid "first-wave" ecocritical work, which tended to concentrate on representations of nature and an "ecocentric" perspective (Buell 8-10), but they are self-evidently positioned to move beyond nature writing, Romantic poetry, and Western American literature. Ecocritical exploration of Victorian literature is alive, and gaining in both strength and interest.

⁷ Buell describes second-wave ecocritics as, among other things, more interested in urban environments along with wilderness ones, more likely to see sciences and humanities as partners across a fuzzy border, and more interested in expanding their studies of literature beyond just nature writing.

I would position myself as a second-wave ecocritic, interested in studying Victorian literature in light of Victorian science, and thus seeing at least one field of science and one field of humanities as partners. My work does not deal with wilderness environments in any traditional sense; rather, I concentrate on individual species or animals being used in Victorian novels, poetry, and science writing, such as bees in *The Origin of Species*, dogs in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, or nightingales in Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem "On the Cliffs." The animal is more important, for me, than the place. Probably the wildest places in the writing I study are the "enchanted woods" in George Meredith's poem "The Woods of Westermain" and the open sea in several of Swinburne's lyrics, but those are not wilderness in the sense first devised by ecocriticism, which looks at "open spaces, perhaps with a few trees, wild animals, or bodies of water" (Bennett and Teague 5), or wilderness in the sense derived from a conception that might be called "traditional Western American," which Allison Byerly describes as "the sublime vistas that staggered the imaginations of early settlers," complete with "[t]he feeling of awe that...depends on the spectator's sense of [the landscape's] dominant power and its ability to call forth a visionary grasp of infinity" (53). While it is possible to view animals as sublimely wild or to see them as symbols of a kind of infinity, there are other aspects of Darwinian kinship that I find more rewarding. There is no sense in which humans in Darwinian kinship need to feel dominated by animals (a sense that would probably only bring back the urge to domination of human exceptionalism; feeling dominated often leads to fear and the need to assert not only one's independence but one's authority) as early American-European settlers might have felt dominated by wilderness. Animals can also be studied in multiple literary places, including the country estates frequented by Meredith's characters, the village environment most typical

of George Eliot's novels, or the around-the-world trip and international correspondence which were both important sources of Darwin's information about different species. My perspective is thus less place-bound than that of many first-wavers, what the German ecocritic Ursula Heise, arguing for a global application of ecocritical ideas rather than an American or nature-writing-focused one, calls "deterritorialized." For Heise, deterritorialization means "the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place" (10), and contradicts some earlier ecocritical ideas that promoted localism (8). Localism *can* be important in a Darwinian context, but it cannot be the only important idea; someone who does not live with primates in their immediate environment, for example, might spend more time being attentive to the local species and humanity's relationships to them, but cannot simply ignore that humans are related to primates because apes are not local. Kinship-in-difference is thus a process of writing about many different places and many different species, and different lenses than place must be chosen. My context is the atheism and agnosticism already defined; I think it offers an interesting perspective that both grows out of Darwin's immediate time period and limits the otherwise extremely wide-ranging idea of kinship. It also adds a new dimension to ecocritical studies that has not, previously, been taken up often; most authors studied by ecocritics have been either spiritual or specifically Christian. Other ecocritics have made that leap themselves, describing the spiritual richness or Oneness that an author's work might offer the critic, regardless of an author's personal beliefs, and thus keeping the theistic lens attached.⁸

⁸ John Elder's work offers an instructive example; it ranges from close reading of many Christian authors, including Annie Dillard and John Milton, in his 1985 *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, to a long meditation on how the Bible influenced his own reading and helped him towards ecological consciousness in his 2001 *Frog Run: Words and Wildness in the Vermont Woods*.

However, this attitude has been changing as well. Religiosity brought into studies of nature writing, in particular, has been criticized by some ecocritics. Michael Cohen, in a wide-ranging article that points out several shortcomings in ecocritical scholarship as it was practiced in its first decade, talks about the writing of first-wavers like John Elder who study the Romantic poets and American nature writers by means of “narrative scholarship”—telling a story of their own experience of landscape, animals, and religion while weaving it around poetic quotes and close reading of those quotes. “Such lyrical, nearly religious work [as narrative scholarship] approaches a timeless harmony, and seems to be beyond rational scrutiny” (22), Cohen notes. The timeless harmony runs the risk of misrepresenting (at least some) ecosystems and once again insisting on spirituality as a necessary component of the bonds between humans and other animals. While it does have its place, and critics like Elder have produced some remarkable and interesting work, it also reproduces “spiritual forces” and emphasis on *individual* humans finding their way back to nature through religious contemplation.

There are other ways to emphasize kinship between humans and animals. One of them is through broadening the field in genre and time period, as already discussed. But the broadening could also continue to include non-religious authors, besides Darwin himself, and studies of how their non-belief connects them with the world. The writings of Elder and other ecocritics like him can coexist with the writings of critics interested in agnosticism and atheism, the same way study of Darwin can coexist with the study of openly religious authors like Thoreau and Dillard. Ecocriticism thus benefits both from greater variety of content and greater variety of contexts.

British Victorian non-believing authors are particularly suitable for this study. While British Romantic authors were for the most part not conventionally Christian, they also often assumed a spiritual dimension to the world, as indeed did many Victorian authors. Karl Kroeber has argued that while “[e]cological conceptions of natural reality need not exclude ideas or attitudes sometimes associated with religiosity,” they also “allow no place for any transcendent deity” (53). Yet Kroeber, another founder of ecocriticism, includes the term *holiness* along with *ecology* in his studies of poetry, and notes that Wordsworth’s poetry is designed to escape being “imprisoned” by the senses, “the purely material environment that animals inhabit” (54). The Romantics, then, also assumed a difference between humans and animals; if humans cannot worship a transcendent deity, they still must themselves transcend the limits of animality, and particularly the animal body. While not as hostile to Darwinian kinship as the idea of special creation, which insisted that God had created *all* species separately, so that different animals had no more relationship to each other than they did to humans, the Romantic conception of links between humans and animals is also not one of shared descent and traits.

Cast into the middle of the changing, charged world that evolution represented, British Victorian authors could no longer simply assume that animals inhabited a lesser world of the senses meant for humans to escape. They needed to confront the changes evolution represented. Some of them managed the transition by reconciling evolution with pre-existing theological beliefs, like the efforts of Charles Kingsley mentioned earlier. Others became actively hostile to evolution—including some scientists who had previously had friendly relationships with Darwin, such as his geology mentor Adam Sedgwick, who set his students a test to demolish *The Origin* (Browne 104)—or to aspects of it, such as Wallace’s

growing conviction that the evolution of humans could not have happened as he and Darwin had first described the evolution of other animals. Others, like Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, enlisted evolutionary theory in the service of causes like eugenics, without necessarily paying much attention to the implications for religion or separation between humans and animals.

The situation provided a great shock of opportunity for nonbelieving authors, one that may in fact have been harder for some of them than simply combating the hostility of believers. Now some of the watchers more annoyed at evolution considered that agnostics and atheists had moved from a fringe element to a central threat. Both Whitwell Elwin, who had reviewed *The Origin* and disliked it, and Samuel Wilberforce, who later attacked T. H. Huxley, believed *The Origin* could lead to atheism, and this made them far more vigorous in their attack, connecting Darwinian theory with actually causing nonbelief as well as enabling it (Browne 112-114). Darwin, uneasy in his agnosticism, appreciated that his niece Julia Wedgwood wrote a review defending him personally from the charges of atheism (Browne 145). George Eliot also felt compelled both to tangle with evolutionary ideas and to resent their intrusion; she mourned the loss of religious mystery to scientific explanation, as well as disliking what she saw as the moral implications of ideas like competition and natural selection (Beer 146). Darwinian kinship, fruitful as it might be, was productive of enormous anxieties.

This, however, speaks in part to its potential for change. Because he could not ignore the evidence, Darwin ultimately published and gave up his faith in Christianity, telling an atheist interviewer Christianity was “not supported by evidence” (Browne 484). George Meredith, less troubled by his own loss of faith, which occurred in adolescence, could write

books that incorporated humanism, complicated views on infidelity, feminism, and the equality of the sexes, and human relationship to nature because he was someone “for whom human life was a value in its own right, subservient to no extraneous purpose” (Jones 122), and Darwinian ideas mingled with his own humanist philosophy to support the idea that the most important relationship was between humans and Nature, not humans and God.

Algernon Charles Swinburne could fling his own turbulent poetry into the rush of change and the new, uncertain, open world that evolutionary theory had created, and even the conservative readers whom he shocked with his atheism and comparison of humans to animals were the more shocked *because* evolutionary theory had prompted them to see that this was a view with the potential to conquer the center of society rather than remaining on its margins. Darwin’s theories advanced science, as he saw it, by freeing it from the dogma of special creation, but they also advanced literature by giving a place to ideas that might have remained bottled-up or expressed to a few people in private if evolution had remained a “gutter” theory supported only by disreputable books. If Darwin could say that a reader’s “reason ought to conquer his imagination” (*Origin* 188), he could also use reason to power imagination, or imagination to power reason, and his theories allowed the explosion of a new kind of imagination, instead of foreclosing all possibilities because of their elision of an afterlife or belief.

This is not necessarily, of course, a comforting vision. Darwin’s theory of kinship as expressed agnostically does neglect the traditional condolences of religion, not simply in its lack of an afterlife but in the sense of limits sharply imposed on traditional human impulses such as transcendence of earthly conditions, be they as hard as poverty or as commonplace as bad weather. Writing about George Meredith’s way of approaching the world—the notion of

constant struggle broken by brief moments of rest and enjoyment, moments when Meredith's characters come as near union with nature as any of those these agnostic and atheist authors write about do—Wendell Harris remarks that Meredith does not dispense much comfort; the possibility of animals, or humans, or art, offering beauty to the world depends on us “continu[ing] to remember the song after the singer has departed” (130). Rather, “Meredith follows Swinburne in replacing a faith in deity with a faith in the possibility of living so as to maximize the pleasures earth offers” (128). This may seem like a relatively simple substitute for God, especially as Harris includes the word faith, but it is not; “Earth defines the conditions of life; there are no visible powers beyond her; what man may aspire to is human spirit grounded in earth's conditions” (Harris 127). Because humans aspire to it does not mean that they *receive* it. The struggle is continual in Meredith, as it is in Darwin. So the vision is not consolatory, but it may be pleasant, it may be beautiful, it may offer overtones of humor as in some of Swinburne or of noble tragedy as in some of Eliot. “Grounded,” unable to take flight, the human spirit is not a soul. Spirit, particularly in Meredith, is a convenient shorthand of talking about human personality that is subject to the same conditions that other animals on Earth endure, suffer, or delight in. These authors change “the question; it is not whether nature holds some benign intercourse with the human spirit, but whether the beauty of nature is not of itself a compensation for much of the inevitable sorrow of life and, more important, whether the belief that human life deserves more pleasure and less pain than nature's processes afford the rest of earth is not man's greatest folly” (Harris 122). Humans are different from other forms of life, but that is a proposition in which the name of any other species could be substituted—dogs are different from other forms of life, nightingales are different from other forms of life—and it would still be true. The

limitations of the bonds and the possibility for existing within the limits of earth are the challenges of this version of kinship-in-difference, not how we should surpass those limits or exactly where the line lies that divides humans from other creatures.

Among the sorrows and the doubts come positive joys as well. In Swinburne's poem, "A Nympholept," from which I have taken the title of this dissertation, we find the speaker delighting in the beauties of earth in a way which passes back and forth between physical reality, doubtful divinity—the nominal god of the poem, Pan, if a deity, is not separate from the world around him, so that it is the physical world the speaker hymns—and his own dreams, consuming him in intense joy:

An earth-born dreamer, constrained by the bonds of birth,
Held fast by the flesh, compelled by his veins that beat
And kindle to rapture or wrath, to desire or to mirth,
May hear not surely the fall of immortal feet,
May feel not surely if heaven upon earth be sweet;
And here is my sense fulfilled of the joys of earth,
Light, silence, bloom, shade, murmur of leaves that meet (McGann & Sligh 323).

The human observer "[m]ay hear not surely...[m]ay feel not surely;" the agnostic uncertainty allows no passage through nature to a god beyond doubt, even as other parts of the poem invoke "the God" as a spirit of the woodland. But this stanza expresses no narratorial discomfort for the lack of certainty. What follows the declarations of agnosticism about immortality and heaven is the word "And," not "But." The physical senses that humans share with animals, especially sight and hearing as invoked in the last line, are enough; they are "the joys of earth," and the speaker is "fulfilled." To be "constrained by the bonds of birth" is to find release into one's own kind of freedom. There is no escape, but there need not be. In "A Nympholept," Swinburne makes it clear that the woodland and its animals—especially snakes and nightingales—and the earth they live on, pulses of darkness and day, fear and

wonder, are productive enough of beauty and joy, and productive, too, of some of Victorian Britain's most beautiful writing.

The Structure of This Dissertation

This dissertation is laid out in four chapters, each covering one of the four Victorian agnostic or atheist authors I have chosen to concentrate on, proceeding in a story of rough movement from the appearance of Darwin's theory and an exploration of his agnostic wonder (Chapter 1), through resistance (Chapter 2), reconciliation of the tensions in evolutionary theory with the author's own ideas (Chapter 3), and gleeful acceptance and use of evolutionary theory to push the boundaries of kinship in a way Darwin never tried (Chapter 4).

Chapter Two, "'The Community of Descent:' Darwin and the Tension and Joy of Kinship" covers Charles Darwin and the *idea* of kinship as expressed in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. I briefly explore the reasons that both some modern Christians and some modern secularists have seen Darwin's theory as depriving life of "meaning"—for the most part, divinely given and transcendent meaning. Darwin's own evocation of wonder and awe in the form of the study of interrelationships between living beings and the joys that these provide for the human mind, as well as his own struggle with the tensions caused by his agnosticism and the expected response—shock and denial—of his society, drives his support of the kinship-in-difference idea. I also explore what George Levine calls the "openness" of Darwin's theory, the outlet it provided to the future for various Victorian authors, and the way in which that future may be open without being progressive or unbounded. Varieties of this openness are used by each of the further three authors in my study.

Chapter Three, “‘We Ought to Know About Our Fellow-Creatures’: George Eliot and the Tensions of Kinship,” examines George Eliot’s use of *and* resistance to Darwinian ideas, particularly in *The Mill on the Floss*. I trace her deconversion from her evangelical faith and her attempts to give Maggie, the heroine of *The Mill*, moments of joy and sharing with animals, particularly with her family’s dog, Yap. However, imbricating Maggie and the other characters within frameworks of animal relationships and metaphors raises the tensions of the narrative to crushing weights, especially because most other characters refuse to acknowledge their kinship at all, and think less of Maggie for being alike to or interested in her “fellow-creatures.” The second major section of this chapter explores *Silas Marner*, whose hero manages to achieve a good relationship with animals despite an unpromising beginning and virtual exile from his community, thanks to his adopted daughter, Eppie, who is openly akin to her fellow-creatures to an even greater degree than Maggie. Throughout the chapter I also examine Eliot’s demonstrations of the fact that, while evolutionary ideas are hugely difficult for her characters to navigate and deal with, Christianity also cannot answer the questions that Darwinian theories have raised. The result is a thick tension that only breaks occasionally for the moments of joy that my other authors show more openly, but which are all the more affecting when they do happen.

Chapter Four, “Comic Unfaith: Meredith’s Agnostic Joy of Kinship,” turns to George Meredith and his employment of Darwin’s ideas against those who would set themselves up as separatists from other species. I look at Meredith, who invented an idea of the Comic Spirit that greatly influenced the theory of comedy, as someone who can accept Darwin’s ideas more easily partially because of that comedy; his worldview contains waste and destruction, but not based on the tensions that Eliot struggles against. Instead, he taunts and

mocks the characters from his novels and poetry, especially Sir Willoughby Patterne of *The Egoist*, who see themselves as exemplary human beings and thus incapable of having a “taint” of the “beast” from their kinship to lower animals. Because Meredith does not often create characters who have nothing to learn, I also discuss the heroes and, more often, heroines of his writing who ultimately overcome their separatism but must spend most of the narrative learning better, and who are not exempt from mockery or “thwackings,” as Meredith called sharp lessons, themselves. Meredith’s tolerance of human foibles is broad, but he sees comedy, rather than Eliot’s tragedy, in the determination of human beings to try and transcend their animal heritage.

Chapter Five, ““We Too Shall Surely Pass Out of the Sun””: Swinburne, Anti-Theism, and the Kinship of Mortality,” shows the bleakness and the joy in agnostic writing taken to its ultimate extreme, passing into the atheism and anti-theism of Swinburne’s poetry. Swinburne celebrates death in myriad forms—the deaths of poets, birds, gods, lovers, all of life—partially through the medium of Greek and Roman paganism, faiths that he could use *because* they are safely dead and have gone to the same end that awaits both humans and other species. Death, with its lack of an afterlife, joins humans and other animals at the deepest bodily level, because humans, in Swinburne’s world, have no souls to take them to a separate fate. My first concentration is on lyrics from Swinburne’s most famous collection of poetry, *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, as these are the most intense expressions of his death wish, but I also use his poem “Hertha” from *Songs Before Sunrise*, written for the liberation of Italy and simultaneously celebrating the death of the Christian God, and his Sappho poem “On the Cliffs” which conveys his love of Sappho’s poetry and the kinship-in-difference of humanity with the earth, especially birds. Swinburne’s later poetry (after 1879)

is represented in my study mainly by *Tristram of Lyonesse*, his grand Arthurian epic in which Tristram and Iseult come together, part, and come together again, sharing great joy and great suffering that join them to birds, particularly the sea-mew or gull. Throughout this chapter, and Swinburne's poetry in general, the kinship of mortality is the bringer of death, but also the bringer of joy.

Chapter Two—“The Community of Descent”: Darwin and the Tension and Joy of Kinship

Introduction

Charles Darwin did not publish the first edition of *The Origin of Species* willingly. He might not have published it at all if not urged on by the discoveries of Alfred Russel Wallace, his younger colleague whose investigations in the Malay Archipelago prompted him to write to Darwin with his own version of natural selection, like Darwin's influenced by Malthus (Quammen 101). Darwin himself was aware of the tension his theory of evolution would cause, and sorry for it; he was sensitive to others' religious beliefs, though in part it was because he knew he would have to work against those beliefs to make theists accept his book (Browne *Power* 83). He would have sympathized with the “disenchantment” that his theory is often said to cause, particularly with the idea that it removed some divine meaning from the world. Darwin considered himself still a Christian believer when he wrote *The Origin*, and he felt increasingly torn between “residual faith” and the conviction that God had nothing to do with the origin of species (Browne *Power* 67).

This disenchantment supposedly empties the world of meaning, producing spiritual emptiness, paralyzing uncertainty, poisonous doubt, or sometimes reactionary faith as those who might otherwise be untroubled theists build higher walls in order to keep the disturbing echoes of evolution out. As George Levine puts it in his introduction to *Darwin Loves You*,

Reason, science, empirical verification, technological triumphs (and frights) have not been enough to satisfy what seems to be an almost universal longing for “meaning.” The world must mean something besides its natural self. Explanation has to satisfy something other than rational curiosity, to point to some significance, some moral ordering, some ultimate justice beyond the disturbing contingencies of the natural world (xii).

Darwin's theory does rely heavily on explanation, but this explanation is not the simple replacement of a religious meaning with an agnostic one. It locates humans as part of—not even at the center of, because there is no center—a vast web of kinship relations, other animals related more or less closely to them along a spectrum of common heritage. This makes humans less transcendent, more dependent on other beings and on natural laws that are not the work of God's hands, caught in a web of interrelations that they did not choose and can only, apparently, change by damaging it. It is little wonder, then, that separatism of some kind, either elevating humanity as the pinnacle of creation or as the despoiler of Eden, is often the result.

Yet there is an alternative to this separatism, and disenchantment is not inevitable. The alternative is kinship—not proposing the all animals are inherently the same as humans, which would be too anthropomorphic, or that humans are so different we can do nothing except damage animals, which would be closing our eyes to the fact that humans can and must live in this world, but seeing humans and animals as related along a spectrum and possible actions as a result of this along a spectrum as well, from more separatist to less, from more positive to nonhuman animals to more damaging. I call this idea *kinship-in-difference*. It begins with biological and anatomical kinship, because out of biological kinship comes everything else, including similarities in human and non-human animal brains, instincts, propensities, and emotions. But it extends, too, into literary and metaphorical kinship, which opens up all sorts of other possibilities, including investigating the representations of kinship in literature.

This kinship is expansive because it embraces the possibility of ongoing change and evolution (not progress) that, as animal studies theorist Erica Fudge points out, Darwin

opened up for *all* creatures, including humans. It is also expansive in that it provided a jolting shock to old beliefs, mostly Christian, about humans as the perfection of God's creation and the ultimate end of all change—thus having no imperative to change anymore.

The creation narrative of the Bible was no longer credible, as the earth was much older than any arithmetical analysis of the Scriptures could propose, and what Darwin put forward instead of the Christian creation myth was the theory of evolution. The outcome of this theory was a world in which nature was never static, in which creatures (and he included human beings in this) were not created in their final state, but had evolved to become what they now were, and would, by implication, continue to evolve (Fudge 18).

This is still an idea that is hard for some modern audiences to accept, even people who consider themselves fairly knowledgeable in evolutionary theory. While they may think in terms of evolution for other species without much problem, humans are still exempted, excepted, put aside from the pace of change—even if, as in the popular contention that humans are still “cavemen” in terms of our genetics, we are marked as special primarily by being evolutionarily unfit for the modern world. As Marlene Zuk, a researcher into the pace of human evolution, summarizes it, the idea that evolution takes literal geologic eons and we must be essentially the same as we were two million or a hundred thousand years ago “makes us feel that humans, who have gone from savanna to asphalt in a mere few thousand years, must be caught out by the pace of modern life, when we'd be much better suited to something more familiar to our history” (3). This is not a *positive* difference from other species, but it is an absolute one; rare are the humans who worry that barnacles, peacocks, or monkeys, to name some species Darwin studied, have been left behind by their own evolution. Their change is either accepted or not important enough to matter.

If this is still a hard point for readers steeped in a hundred and fifty years of evolution to accept, it could be an even harder one for Darwin's contemporaries, many of whom had

had some exposure to evolutionary ideas, but mostly didn't have the conviction that even non-human animals were subject to continuing change. This is the challenge of kinship-in-difference, the idea that humans have not been sculpted by evolution into the exact same shape as other species, but also that they have not been completely differentiated, and above all that they are subject to the same, largely or entirely material, forces of the natural world, especially time, as other species, and that understanding this is the best way to relate to those other species and understand our own place among them. It is a difficult, delicate balancing act; Andrea Sobloff, a theorist Fudge cites, says that kinship is one of three profound metaphors by which we relate to animals, in that "animals are represented as members of our families," but Sobloff also worries that these metaphors simply make animals disappear and only leave us with the metaphor to relate to (11-12). Between letting animals disappear behind the metaphors and presenting animals as lying on the other side of a dividing line that cannot be crossed is kinship-in-difference. It may not be difficult for modern readers in the same way it was difficult for Darwin's original audience, but Darwin himself admitted that his theory was hard to cope with, and had to be thought about and turned over in the mind again and again until understanding was reached; "Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the universal struggle for life, or more difficult—at least I have found it so—than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind" (*Origin* 62). Such constant, complex, recurring thought is more likely to break through the barriers set up in many human minds between their own species and others than soundbites or laments about the fall of humans from a paleo-Eden.

And after all, not all the nineteenth-century authors who argued with Darwin, who were swept away by his theory, excited or charmed or devastated by it, accepted everything

that Darwin said, or did so easily. They took from his books, especially *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, what mattered to them and what could be used as the basis for writings of their own that expressed their own philosophical and imaginative points of view. But they also could struggle bitterly against it, could apply evolutionary theory to animals that Darwin did not study, or could make evolution part of their narratives' own moral machinery to punish the characters. What matters most is that they were *engaged* readers, not relying only on echoes of Darwin's writing that tend to be refracted and refracted again through others' interpretations of Darwin for people like some fundamentalist creationists in America, and are often unreflective of the original. To read the original, as agnostic and atheist Victorian writers like George Eliot, George Meredith, and Algernon Charles Swinburne did, and react to it, is to be intimately more intertwined with Darwin's point-of-view than someone reading only at second-hand can be. They did not, and could not, withdraw from the battle to comprehend and hold it in mind. Separatism is largely impossible without withdrawal of some kind, into philosophical contemplation of humanity as either the pinnacle or the nadir of organic beings. While some religious authors managed that withdrawal by using faith to reassure themselves that humans were still created in God's image, agnostic and atheist authors could not stand on that faith. They had to cope with what Darwin had involved them in.

Yet that struggle is not without beauty or joy. The kinship Darwin taught other humans to see is also "energetic, diverse, beautiful, intelligent, and sensible," in Levine's words, sensitive to the concerns of those who worry about nature but not paralyzed by it into seeing humanity as fallen from an Eden (whether an Eden of living "in harmony" with the natural world or in dominion above the other beasts). The bounding energy of Darwin's

writing surges forward even when he writes about barnacles, bees, and ants, invertebrates that many people interested in animal rights even today feel are less entitled to consideration from humans than dogs and cats are (Morse and Danahay 2). Darwin's examples in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* range across multiple animal classes and families, so that the book with "man" in the title is the story of humanity's emergence from a cluster of related species, not Man's magnificent isolation. The Darwin who sings the entangled bank in the "Conclusion" to *The Origin of Species* infuses his writing with beauty that consists in large part of observations of animals and how those observations could further bind humans into the contingent, changing world around them. The intelligence needed to make such observations and deduce natural selection from them was one of Darwin's greatest assets; *The Origin* is full of statements about the need for reason and the imagination to work together, the imagination as the driving engine of intelligence's explanatory power. And since Darwin knew that many of his conclusions would *not* seem sensible to contemporaries who believed that each species was a separate thought in the mind of a Creator,⁹ he strove to ground his own hypothesis in as many facts as possible.

The mental world thus created by Darwin's theory, despite its many appealing qualities, had a different shape than that proposed by natural theologians like Paley or, more active in Darwin's time, the philosopher of science William Whewell. It is open, in the sense that humans are no longer foreclosed into a Biblical cycle of history, or constrained by the presence of God. But it is not unlimited. If humans are animals, we are subject to all the same limits that we have been thinking about for years as the fate of other species: we will die, we

⁹ Darwin was different from most of his contemporaries in proposing a classification system based on common descent and genealogy. Louis Agassiz, Darwin's great rival at Harvard University, argued, for example, that species were thoughts in the mind of God. Darwin's objection to this was that, as no human could know the mind of God, classifying species this way remained essentially guesswork.

cannot transcend earth (because there is no “outside” to escape to), and our own powers, even our technology, are subject to natural law. This is one way in which the world can seem to be “disenchanted,” in the words of Max Weber, who blamed Darwin’s theory and the scientific revolutions it launched in large measure for sucking both belief and enchantment out of the world (Watson 192).

Yet, to consider the issue again from another point of view, “traditional,” or pre-modern, or pre-Darwinian, society contained much that was less than enchanting; belief could be used to oppose and oppress others as well as give comfort; and animals, in particular, did not start to have their welfare seriously regarded until the nineteenth century, a movement that particularly picked up pace after Darwin’s publications (Morse and Danahay 1). Looking at kinship and what Darwinian theory has given us, the sensation of being part of a much larger world in terms of species and perspectives on those species should or at least can compensate for the loss of a grand destiny that elevates humans above other species and guarantees our immortality. What Darwin shows are the indissoluble links binding humanity and other species, something that we might struggle with or fuss about, but can also accept with grace. As Peter Watson argues in his historical study of atheist authors and philosophers since Nietzsche, “Re-enchanting the world is a much more positive activity than merely mourning its disenchantment” (235). And Darwin was the most active agent of re-enchantment, of kinship’s wonder and expanding of perspective, in Victorian Britain.

“Infinite Complexity”: Darwin and *The Origin of Species*¹⁰

Darwin’s book begins with closely argued chapters, as is usual for the rest of *The Origin*—but these chapters are on artificial selection, the breeding of animals by humans, not the observations of natural selection among wild animals that Darwin is more famous for. It is, in some ways, an inauspicious beginning. Darwin was unusual among scientists of his day in studying domestic animals as well as and sometimes even in preference to wild ones (Browne *Voyaging* 521), but Alfred Russel Wallace thought there was no parallel with “artificial selection” in “natural selection” (Browne *Power* 18). The relationship of pet, or livestock, and owner is also not the same as kinship. Harriet Ritvo makes the point in her classic *The Animal Estate* that Darwin’s version of classification, community of descent, can in some ways still be seen as hierarchical; *The Origin of Species* “dethroned the deity,” but supposedly demonstrated human superiority by saying that humans had the capacity to recognize evolution in the first place, a pattern that humans could “perceive or impose” (40) on other species. Darwin’s most influential idea was supposed to be the survival of “the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy,” and humans thought of themselves as all those things (Ritvo 41). Together, the pattern of imposed perception and the immediate appropriation of evolutionary insights and virtues by humans, combined with the control that humans already exercised over animal breeding even if it led to constant inbreeding, made Darwinian evolutionary theory a conservative force (Ritvo 42).

¹⁰ References to *The Origin* throughout this chapter are to the first edition, unless otherwise noted. Although Darwin made many and immediate changes to the book, enough that a second edition was published in 1860 and a sixth before the end of his life, those changes were not always driven solely by Darwin’s attempt to clarify so much as his fear of controversy. The insertion in the Conclusion of the second edition that species proceed from the “breath of the Creator” was a later addition, and later regretted (Browne *Power* 96).

Darwin's account of artificial selection in these early chapters, however, shows a distinctly different point of view from the class-obsessed world of cattle barons and dog fanciers that Ritvo documents. Dog owners in particular were obsessed with separation, drawing lines between breeds and types of shows that "metaphorically expressed the hopes and fears of fanciers about issues like social status and distinctions between classes" (Ritvo 84). Darwin, however, shows the mistakes that breeders make in using small physical features as the basis for not only new breeds or types but new species and variations, dividing them into smaller and smaller groups rather than seeing their kinship. Human *beliefs* about the breeds they create this way may well be wrong; Darwin does not believe, unlike most breeders, that every single pigeon or dog or cat with slight differences in color or facial features goes back to a different wild species, but rather that in most cases, the animal has been domesticated only once, from a single species that was selected into new breeds. Breeders from pigeon fanciers to dog owners are "strongly impressed with the difference between the several races," and tend to focus on that instead of kinship (*Origin* 29). But Darwin makes the point over and over again that domestic breeds cannot all have descended from wild stocks that then went extinct in the wild (*Origin* 19). Change is more likely than death, continuation more likely than an end. The sense of expansion that I defined above, and the basis for the bigger shock that comes with thinking of humans as subject to the same laws of change as animals, begins here.

So does the loss of a deity. As Gillian Beer points out in *Darwin's Plots*, Darwin is unable to remove anthropological bias and teleology from his language completely; when speaking of the "given" material that human breeders work with to produce pigeons or cattle with different features, Darwin still implies a giver (*Origin* 39). But the slight variations that

ultimately build up to enormous beaks, different colors of coat, or other features are not transcendent gifts from God; rather “[Man] can never act by selection, excepting on variations which are first given to him in some slight degree by nature” (*Origin* 39). And for Darwin, as Beer emphasizes, the argument is changed dramatically, not simply by one word, with this substitution, despite Darwin’s arguably gender-essentializing trick of turning to Mother Nature as so many writers did. Beer argues, “The effects of personifying nature as female are manifold: but for the purposes of this argument there are two particularly important effects –one is to distinguish Nature from God” (65). Nature is the giver, the presence that takes over God’s role without simply replicating that role. Beer adds that Darwin attempted several revisions to remove the idea of an anthropomorphic, intelligent Nature from *The Origin*, but was never quite successful. However, he did not need to be in order to create an alternate net of kinship than the one that said God had created each species separately and they were only alike in being thoughts in his divine mind. God is no longer necessary. Evolution is the way out of creationism.

Humans are, however, not the *same* as animals. They are linked back to animals, cousins, as it were, at one remove. But Darwin never needs to insist that humans are *identical* to other animals, any more than he must insist that dogs are identical to cattle, or, springing ahead to species discussed in the third chapter of *The Origin*, water beetles are the same as elephants. Instead, he places humans inside the same net of knowledge, doubt, wonder, and argument that constitute kinship for the other species. If “the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings, with which it comes into competition for food or residence, or from which it has to escape, or on which it preys” (*Origin* 77), then humans are perforce included. Darwin did not name

them specifically in this sentence to avoid outrage, much as does in most other sections of the book, but “every organic being [being] related...to...other organic beings” certainly does not reject humans. Humans are organic. They are, therefore, related to other organic beings.

Seeing this, keeping in mind the kinship relation between humans and other beings, may be incredibly difficult, because humans no longer enter into competition or escape from other animals as openly as they once did, but Darwin has anticipated even that difficulty, by noting that the structure itself can be “hidden” from a casual glance. Darwin’s theory never allows humans to become separate or isolated. They are always tied, bound, kinned, by being subjected to the same limitations and possibilities as other species. As Darwin moves on to indicate in other chapters, if those possibilities include beauty and wondrous adaptations in organisms no matter how small, humans can have their share of beauty despite being non-transcendent, as well.

Nevertheless, to hold in mind the kinship between humans and animals is often a difficult thing, as mentioned in the introduction, so different do we *feel* ourselves to be, one species judging others who are not capable of judging humans in return. Even scientists heavily involved in studies of animal intelligence can perceive this as an impossible step or jump; primatologist Thomas Suddendorf calls it “the gap,” and argues that studies on rats, mice, and similar common laboratory animals are often not useful when it comes to “characteristics that turn out to be entirely unique to humans” (Suddendorf 276). While Suddendorf does acknowledge that humans are primates and believes that there is no sense in denying our mammalian heritage, he also believes that “[t]here is no point belittling the *extraordinary* powers that *separate* us from other animals” (276, my italics). Darwin, who does think that human “powers” lie along a continuum with animals’ abilities rather than

beyond a gap, also admitted that one constantly has to approach and tackle the idea anew, that it does not feel as “natural” as the conviction that humans are a proud and different creation: “It [imagining different forms of competition than direct combat] will convince us of our ignorance on the mutual relations of all organic beings; a conviction as necessary, as it seems to be difficult to acquire” (*Origin* 78). Only after admitting the ignorance we have, rather than the knowledge, can we begin to reach for the knowledge. But the one fact that we must “acquire” is the “mutual relations of all organic beings.” No matter how sympathetic to the minds he was trying to change, no matter how difficult humility in the face of complexity is, Darwin is unwilling to let the fact of kinship go.

This is in large part because Darwin finds the facts of kinship moving, exciting, and beautiful—not simply dry ink on the pages of a book, or even dry adaptations and no more on the surfaces of leaves and insect carapaces. There is relationship exhibited in “the beautifully plumed seed of the dandelion, and in the flattened and fringed legs of the water-beetle,” although “the relation seems at first confined to the elements of air and water” (*Origin* 77). But Darwin notes the relationships with other animals and plants of the same species that necessarily follow; even among the smallest flowers like dandelions, disdained as weeds by humans, and the aquatic insects that are not eye-catching in the same way tigers and lions are, kinship prevails. “[B]eautiful co-adaptations” are also in “the humblest parasite which clings to the hairs of a quadruped or feathers of a bird... in short, we see beautiful adaptations everywhere and in every part of the natural world” (*Origin* 60-61). These are “adaptations” later in the sentence, but “co-adaptations” first; there is no adaptation that exists in isolation, precisely because of the relationships that Darwin acknowledges humans have such a difficult time holding in mind. Although Darwin does not place the idea in words

in this point in the book, the implication is that one source of this difficulty is the forgetfulness of adaptations being *co-*; naturalists of Darwin's time might admire a beetle or seed by itself, while forgetting that it inevitably responded to some relationship, some kinship, when evolving.

Such a joyous view of the Darwinian world does receive its challenge from within Darwin's text, within, in fact, the same chapter that talks about beautiful co-adaptations, the famous view of natural selection as "[t]he face of Nature...[as] a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force" (*Origin* 67). Displeased with this metaphor, Darwin removed it from succeeding editions of the book (Beer 65). Beer notes that "The drive towards actualisation has created an image so grotesque, so disturbingly figurative of violence, in which the barriers between earth and body have so far vanished that the wedge image has become shockingly sadistic in a way that effaces its argumentative usefulness" (66). But she also notes that "The multi-vocal nature of metaphor allows [Darwin] to express, without insisting on, kinship" (56). This particular metaphor, though ultimately judged a failure both by Darwin and by Beer, breaks down "the barriers between earth and body"—and also between humans and animals, humans and the rest of nature, humans and the physical world. It is part of the lineage of metaphors used Darwin uses throughout *The Origin* to tie humans and animals together.

Conjoined with kinship is the movement of metaphor outwards, in space and time but also from species to species, and the blurring of lines that some humans of Darwin's time thought set in stone, separating species from each other and humanity from other animals. As Beer phrases it, "The whole movement of *The Origin* is towards expansion, not stabilisation.

Again the paradox enters: it was the expansion of *material explanation* that he sought, not a metaphysical sweep into the ‘inexplicable’ language of creation, which he sedulously avoided” (93, emphasis in original). Darwin’s chapter on honeybees and their making of wax cells perhaps shows this best.

While maintaining throughout this seventh chapter that the “bees, of course, [did not know] that they swept their spheres at one particular distance from each other” (*Origin* 235) and that the process belongs to natural selection and not a foresight or knowledge of the bees or even the hive or swarm as a whole, and thus, in one way, keeping his explanation confined (to the material world), Darwin stealthily makes the case for the bee’s prowess to lie along a continuum of abilities with human architecture. Humanity appears at the beginning of the hive-bee’s subsection in Chapter 7 as the knowledgeable scientific observer and admirer of bees, “[h]e [who] must be a dull man who can examine the exquisite structure of a comb, so beautifully adapted to its end, without enthusiastic admiration” proclaims Darwin, and immediately after that as the “mathematicians” who tell other humans that “bees have practically solved a recondite problem, and have made their cells of the proper shape to hold the greatest possible amount of honey, with the least possible consumption of precious wax in their construction” (*Origin* 224). The bees have worked out a solution to a mathematical problem that could baffle educated humans, then—not with equations, foresight, or conjecture, in the way that humans would have, but they have “solved” it nonetheless. Darwin’s choice of verb and noun (“solved,” “problem”) is particularly apropos here, as it maintains the metaphorical math in the sentence even after the reader has hit the noun “bees.” The idea of solving is still alive as Darwin makes clear all the differences in the *way* that

humans and bees solve. It is “kinship-in-difference” that is on display here, the shared (in this case) architectural or mathematical capacity for creation expressed in different ways.

From the scientist and the mathematician, Darwin then expands his tallying of humankind to bring in a different profession, the artisan, because “[i]t has been remarked that a skilful workman, with fitting tools and measures, would find it very difficult to make cells of wax of the true form, though this is perfectly effected by a crowd of bees working in a dark hive” (*Origin* 224). The workman has his skill, his tools and measures; the bees have their crowd and their darkness, as well as what Darwin calls “the most wonderful of all instincts, that of the hive-bee” (*Origin* 235). Not identical, but akin; though Darwin notes the difficulty of the task for the workman, he does not say it would be impossible. The workman, nevertheless, cannot do work—the same verb is used for both species—superior to that of the bees. Still, humans and bees *are* different, using different methods even if the goal ends up the same. Despite Darwin’s language and intentions, he may seem to end up effecting a separation here.

However, neither is the human spectator presented as beneath the bee, so distant from the bees’ marvelous ability that “we” cannot understand it and are separated by a gulf from appreciation of it. Instead, Darwin’s persistently used word is “wonderful”—of the sixteen uses he makes of it in Chapter 7 of *The Origin of Species*, half of those refer to the instincts of the hive-bee (207-235). This expands in two different ways, one in the same chapter, as the slave-making instinct of certain species of ants is also “wonderful” (223), and despite Darwin’s warm admiration of bees, he also calls their initial instincts “hardly more wonderful than those which guide a bird to make its nest” (227-228). The word “wonderful” binds species together, bees to birds and slave-making ants through instincts similarly capable of

producing wonder, and humans to bees through their admiration invoked by the word, and through bees as the middleman, humans to birds and slave-making ants. Admiration and study of one species produces admiration and study of another, of two more, of perhaps even more than that (given that Darwin does not, as he does with the bees and ants, name a particular species of nest-builder, “bird” functions as a higher signifier and an entryway to feeling for all the members of its taxonomic class, rather than a delimiter). When Darwin says, “I believe that the hive-bee has acquired, through natural selection, her inimitable architectural powers” (*Origin* 228), it is only completing the circle of kinship-in-difference, through the use this time of the word “inimitable” asserts that, while hive-bees’ instincts are akin to the instincts of birds, they are unable to be imitated by birds or even other species of bees that Darwin mentions in the chapter. And to use the words “powers” and “architectural,” substituting for the “instincts” and “hive-making” references he more usually uses elsewhere in the chapter, ties the bee once again to the humans he began the chapter with, the architects and the mathematicians who have made a study of how the bees build their hive-cells, marveling at the bees’ skill.

This is the second direction in which the word “wonderful” gestures, to the whole book of *The Origin of Species* which humans will take in and read to comprehend Darwin’s argument. George Levine argues that, for Darwin, “wonder generates everything else, including the most level-headed and rational explanations” (*Writer* 10). Wonder is Darwin’s consistent attitude throughout the book, though combined with protective anxiety over the effects of his argument that sometimes seems to darken the tone, and though he did worry about the misery and suffering that he thought might dominate readers’ view of natural selection. Darwin did not despise humankind and elevate other species above them any more

than he thought humankind a radically different master and lord of the creation whose status had to be protected. As Levine argues, “It is notorious that there is a persistent force deflationary of human pride in Darwin’s arguments,” but the answer to this is not to swing to contempt and portray humanity as a destroyer species because we are not favored of God; rather, we, “[l]earning the importance of and reality of other [species], not assuming the world is made for us, understanding that every organism (with implications for our human organisms always unspoken but latent in the *Origin*) is connected to other organisms, visible and invisible, all around us” (Levine *Writer* 90), stand a chance of escaping from the trap of human exceptionalism. We are different from other species around us, but as a hive-bee is different from a slave-making ant, not different in origin. We are akin to them as well, and the difficulty of holding this idea in mind, of constantly reminding ourselves of it, might replace both overweening pride and excessive humility with a joyous wonder and admiration for earth’s species instead, a wonder and admiration well worth having.

The "Community of Descent": Darwin and *The Descent of Man*

By 1871, Darwin felt better able to tackle the notion of the kinship of humans with other species openly. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin retains his acceptance of natural selection’s explanatory power that he first put forth in *The Origin*. It is still more important in *The Descent*, because he does not have as many fully worked-out explanations for human variations in this book as he does for variations among bees, ants, barnacles, and others in *The Origin*. But even in a book titled after humans—or “Man,” arguably the capitalized name that puts the natural world further off than a species name—the kinship of humans with other animals, and the tendency to emphasize that kinship instead of separatism, remains paramount.

In Chapter 2, Darwin lists some of the traits that have been believed to separate humans from other animals (such as progress of “history” or “civilization,” use of tools, use of language, a sense of beauty, worship of God, self-consciousness, and the power of abstraction). In each case, he finds arguments to cast doubt on these traits being such absolute dividing lines as they are often said to be, often by pointing out evidence that at least parts of them are inherited, and therefore can belong to other animals who are part of the community of descent and share humanity’s inheritance, as well. Babies’ babbling points to an innate origin for language. Birds show a capacity to appreciate the beauty of colors and movements in the males’ employment of bright colors and courtship dances. Self-consciousness and individuality may be argued as “higher” faculties that animals do not use, but Darwin finds them fuzzily enough defined that it is as hard to discover arguments for them being special human gifts as it is to discover arguments against the idea. The inability to see exactly from an animal’s perspective, rather than observe its behavior, means, for Darwin, that it is difficult to say how much animals conceive of themselves as individuals—but this very difficulty results in the observer’s also being unable to define how different animals are from humans on this basis.

The supposedly “insuperable line” (qtd. in Garrard 142) with humans above, animals below, does not, in a Darwinian point of view, exist. What exists is the intense human anxiety that there *be* a line, that humans are not the same as animals, not even kin, but separated by a divide—a gap, to use Suddendorf’s terminology—that animals cannot and will never cross. Erica Fudge, an animal liberationist critic, argues in her book *Perceiving Animals* that humans feel the need to keep drawing the line over and over, asserting superiority even as their anxious assertions undermine that very superiority; did it actually

exist, it would be a fact, and there would be no need to continually restate it (Garrard 142). Fudge's example is blood sports, specifically bear baiting, and how they functioned as a means for asserting human dominance, but the "line" is a concept that appears in more general critiques of human exceptionalism and separatism as well. Paul Waldau, in his introduction to *Animal Studies*, describes human exceptionalism as "the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth's other life forms" (8). It is a force that helps its believers resist the uncomfortable idea that the way we treat other animals is wrong, because if we are superior to them, the issue of their mistreatment cannot ascend to our level any more than they themselves can. In its softer form, human exceptionalism may promote the idea that we simply have more "important" issues than animals and no energy to spare to concentrate on theirs; in a harder form, it makes the gap so insuperable that it becomes a void, on the other side of which we cannot see other animals at all.

The whole of *The Descent of Man* is dedicated to crossing the line, jumping the gap, banishing the void back into nonexistence. Humans' bodies, down to smaller sense organs like ears, show our common descent. When talking about humans' inability to prick their ears toward suspicious sounds as herbivores like deer do, Darwin suggests, but "is not quite satisfied with" (*Descent* 31), the idea that the ancestors of humans were too safe for too long, and thus lost the power of erecting their ears to warn them of danger. This openness to alternate explanations, and the power to uncertainly propound ideas without marking them as the absolute truth, has left Darwin's theories of human origins open to opponents who

suggest that he did not believe them himself.¹¹ Of course, that openness is also necessary to separate natural selection from the theory of special creation; natural selection is open to questioning and to correction, and is falsifiable. Darwin predicted in both *The Origin* and *The Descent* that future naturalists would use his theory to reach conclusions he was incapable of seeing, a prediction that perhaps came true most thoroughly in the modern synthesis that merged Mendelian genetics with Darwinian theory and affirmed the kinship of humans and other animals through the study of genes—the mechanism of heredity that humans share with other life forms.

One of Darwin's predictions of his kinship idea prevailing is near the end of Chapter 1 of *The Descent of Man*, where Darwin claims openly for the first time that humans and other animals are both part of the “community of descent” (29). “Community,” with its overtones of society as well as kinship, flings the future wide once again. Darwin goes on to say that this insight is the one that will triumph over the still-held theory of special creation that said an “ideal plan,” thoughts in the mind of God, was the origin of both humans and animals and accounted for their similarities in place of blood kinship:

[T]o take any other view, is to admit that our own structure, and that of all the animals around us, is a mere snare laid to entrap our judgment...It is only our natural prejudice, and that arrogance which made our forefathers declare that they were descended from demi-gods, which lead us to demur to this conclusion. But the time will before long come when it will be thought wonderful that naturalists, who were well acquainted with the comparative structure and development of man and other mammals, should have believed that each was the work of a separate act of creation (*Descent* 29).

The prejudice is “natural,” but still prejudice for all that—the arrogance of separatism, cast in different words but not in a new guise. Darwin goes out of his way to avoid committing the

¹¹ These suggestions take many forms, including the idea that Darwin recanted evolution on his deathbed to a woman named Lady Hope, supposedly saying, “How I wish I had not expressed my theory of evolution as I have done.” This story is discussed and refuted in Ronald W. Clark's 1985 book *The Survival of Charles Darwin: A Biography of a Man and an Idea*.

natural fallacy, which says that something is good merely because it is part of nature; the products of nature for him are often beautiful and wonderful, but not always peaceful and harmonious. Instead, it is prejudice and arrogance that receive the potentially good, potentially harmful adjective “natural” in this passage. And if this paragraph claims the development of "man and other mammals," rather than humans and all other kinds of animals, it is a relic of Darwin's own prejudice in favor of not stirring controversy and using what he could most easily prove. The rest of *The Descent*, while frequently mentioning apes, links humans as well to peacocks, and to Darwin’s beloved bees.

When using bees, Darwin tackles a subject often seen as one of the ultimate dividing lines between humans and animals: conscience, or morality. Darwin does not argue that bees and humans are moral in the same way; they are different. But once again, it is a *difference* and not a barrier between humans and the rest of the community of life, not a trait that people could call on to sever kinship. Darwin writes, “It may be well first to premise that I do not wish to maintain that any strictly social animal, if its intellectual faculties were to become as active and as highly developed as in man, would acquire exactly the same moral sense as ours” (*Descent* 86). This guards against anthropomorphizing the bees, which would be attributing to them the same emotions, thoughts, or (in this instance) code of morality as humans. Darwin can go one better than anthropomorphism, which, while often accused of misrepresenting animals by attributing qualities to them that they cannot have, in fact is another form of separatism, able to imagine animals only in terms of humans. Darwin imagines bees with the qualities he already thinks them capable of developing because they lie along a continuum with humans instead of on the other side a gap; he imagines humans as bees *and* bees as humans. “If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under

precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering” (*Descent* 86). The “same conditions as hive-bees” would have “men” driven by different instincts, different conditions of life—the “crowd” in darkness that Darwin talks about in the hive-insect passage from *The Origin*—and different conditions of morality, but it is not impossible to imagine. As Levine remarks, “So, as almost always, an analysis of relations across extant organisms, this time bees, explains the historic process” (*Writer* 157). Once again, a reach across time and space and conditions of imagination reveals a relation, not a gap—a difference, but a kinship.

That same kinship lies in appreciation of beauty, another trait that Darwin listed in Chapter 2 of *The Descent* as often called upon to draw the insuperable line. The peacock is Darwin’s example here, in part because it serves him as an example of both natural selection, since he can describe a slow, gradual process by which its tail feathers and the markings on the tail might have evolved, and sexual selection, since he can account for the presence of the tail despite its being a potentially damaging and distracting physical feature by attributing it to female choice. This does not mean that Darwin is always feminist in portraying sexual selection or women. Beer notes that Darwin “makes it explicit elsewhere throughout *The Descent* that, in contrast to all other species (where the *female* most commonly holds the power of selection), among humankind the male dominates choice. This reversal creates crucial difficulties” (197). This, then, seems to be a place where Darwin’s own culturally-inherited patriarchal attitudes made it difficult for him to see kinship between humans and other species.

However, in the peacock passage itself humans are “we,” a group without sex, together, admiring the peacock’s tail. Darwin represents himself as “I” earlier in the passage when talking about his own process of tracing the selection for the male’s tail-feathers—“I have elsewhere described” (*Descent* 346, my italics)—but when the female peacock enters the text, the species identity reasserts itself. “If we picture to ourselves a progenitor of the peacock in an almost exactly intermediate condition between the existing peacock, with his enormously elongated tail-coverts, ornamented with single ocelli, and an ordinary gallinaceous bird with short tail-coverts, merely spotted with some colour, we shall see a bird allied to Polyplectron” (*Descent* 349), Darwin muses, and then passes on, within four sentences, from humans’ view of beauty to female peacocks’ view of beauty, from natural selection to sexual selection. The Polyplectron, the related bird, does not have as magnificent a tail as the peacock and therefore has not been under sexual selection as fierce; “[t]he males of Polyplectron are no doubt beautiful birds, but their beauty, when viewed from a little distance, cannot be compared with that of the peacock” (*Descent* 329). Who is doing the comparing is left open, another expansion of the text to tie together humans and animals; there is a bridge from specific, human “We” to the ambiguous “cannot be compared” to the specific, extra-human “[m]any female progenitors of the peacock [who] must, during a long line of descent, have appreciated this superiority; for they have unconsciously, by the continued preference for the most beautiful males, rendered the peacock the most splendid of living birds” (*Descent* 349). Even if the sentence about the greater beauty of the male peacock as compared to Polyplectron is taken to be in a human voice, it is immediately clear that “female progenitors” can appreciate the superiority of beautiful tails, and that “the

peacock [as] the most splendid of living birds” is true for both human observers and female peacock observers. Appreciation for beauty is no barrier to kinship.

As far as religious feeling, another dividing line, goes, Darwin believes that that, too, could have a natural origin rather than divine, supernatural revelation. With no God necessary to drive natural selection, religious feeling cannot be seen as supernatural or having a divine origin; it must come from the same community of descent that produced morality and the feeling of beauty. While Darwin admits that human religious feeling is extremely complex, not all of the emotions that compose it are positive ones, since it “consist[s] of love, complete submission to an exalted and mysterious superior, a strong sense of dependence... fear, reverence, gratitude, hope for the future, and perhaps other elements” (*Descent* 83). Darwin here does not explain fear as a positive emotion, the “fear of God” that Christian theologians sometimes describe as awe and appreciation for God’s gifts and power rather than an emotion developing from terror. Nor is religious feeling, despite containing “submission to an exalted and mysterious superior,” suffered to remain exalted itself. Darwin explains that “No being could experience so complex an emotion until advanced in his intellectual and moral faculties to at least a moderately high level” (*Descent* 83). But the emotion is distant from some others that animals experience because of its complexity, not because it is somehow a unique human possession. Notice, as well, that Darwin attributes the emotion to a “being,” not a “human” or “man.” This leaves the door open for other beings to form their own relationships to “distant and exalted superiors.”

Indeed, Darwin gives such examples in the next few lines, the devotion of a dog to its master being described as “deep love...associated with complete submission, some fear, and perhaps other feelings,” and the feeling of a “monkey [for] his beloved keeper” being called

one in which “the transports of joy appear to be somewhat less, and the sense of equality is shewn in every action” (*Descent* 83). The monkey, closer to humans in the community of descent, is placed by Darwin as feeling more of “the sense of equality.” However, just in case this should seem to position humans as more advanced or progressive than dogs, or than monkeys given that a monkey’s feeling is not *identical* to religious devotion, Darwin adds the observation about the monkey feeling that he is the equal of his keeper. Humans are not to take any of Darwin’s observations as a case for separatism. Levine calls this Darwin’s “antipathy to the anthropocentric arguments of Natural Theology” (*Writer* 90), the belief system that positioned humans as literally above animals because of their creation by the Christian God in his image.

Instead, Darwin opens up a decidedly agnostic world of devotion among dogs and monkeys, and further depresses human pretensions by adding, “Professor Braubach goes so far as to maintain that a dog looks on his master as on a god...It is said that Bacon long ago, and the poet Burns, held the same notion” (*Descent* 83). Humans know they are not gods; a dog’s making this mistake, with religious devotion along a continuum with humans’, at least hints at the possibility that humans have made a similar mistake, deciding that something superior and above them exists when what they admire may only be an exaggeration of their own characteristics. This was a comparison that hurt Darwin’s devout wife Emma. To say that a belief in the saving power of Christ and immortality was only a more rarified variation of a dog’s loyalty was, she complained, “again putting God further off” (cit. on Desmond & Moore *Life* 573), increasing the distance between the world of daily life and any Prime Mover. Thus, the only separation allowed into the text is that between the driving belief behind Natural Theology and the world full of kinship that Darwin was trying to discuss.

Darwin does add that belief in a single “Creator and Ruler of the universe” is different from a belief in plural gods, and says that “this [question as to whether a single god exists] has been answered in the affirmative by the highest intellects that have ever lived” (*Descent* 82). He was still, as Emma’s reaction shows, surrounded by people who could be hurt by his disbelief. This statement about monotheism, however, is as much a rhetorical strategy to defuse criticism as a personal statement of private Deism; 1851 and the death of his daughter Annie, his most beloved child, at ten years old, “chimed the final death-knell for his Christianity, even if it had been a long, drawn-out process of decay” (Desmond & Moore *Life* 387). The existence of God is not *necessary* to *The Descent of Man* any more than it is to *The Origin of Species*. Two years later, in 1873, the most open religious statement Darwin would make in a letter was that God was “beyond the scope of man’s intellect” (cit. on Desmond & Moore *Life* 603), an echo of Huxley’s agnosticism. Darwin thus aligns himself with dogs and monkeys who find the actions of humans, in turn “beyond the scope” of their intellect—and since Darwin’s theory depended on precise observations and knowledge, he need not comment on a subject that observations and knowledge could have no bearing on.

Darwin is, in *The Descent* more openly than in *The Origin*, impatient with the concomitant notion that the physical evidence of the community of descent, such as fossils, was simply false, a test of faith to see if humans could reject it and revere God uncompromisingly. Thinking that humans and animals are *not* descended from the same ancestors would mean that all the evidence of common descent is simply a “snare laid to entrap our judgment” (*Descent* 29), as cited previously, and therefore no kind of science, not simply evolutionary theory, could be practiced; scientists would have to spend all their time doubting their eyes and reasoning and trying to decide whether the evidence they had

uncovered was simply a test of faith. Likewise, embryology, a science practiced by many professionals other than Darwin, would be impossible, because of the well-known fact that developing human fetuses look like the fetuses of other animals. “If the origin of man had been wholly different from that of all other animals, these various appearances would be mere empty deceptions; but such an admission is incredible,” Darwin scoffs. “These appearances, on the other hand, are intelligible, at least to a large extent, if man is the co-descendant with other mammals of some unknown and lower form” (*Descent* 121). A belief in a separate supernatural origin for each species gains nothing except some small comfort for its believers; it destroys the basis of science by rendering it unintelligible, *incapable* of being understood. Kinship offers understanding for the scientist as well as a way for the interested amateur to connect to the “community of descent.” Such interested amateurs would eventually include novelists and poets.

Along with them, however, come specific ways for nonbelievers to consider concepts like “the general good” that might seem empty without Christianity. The absence of God or supernatural lineages for humans and other species makes not just for intelligibility but for new ways of understanding a physical as well as mental or spiritual good in life. Darwin *does* have a definition of general good, but it is not one that is necessarily dependent on following moral ideals: “The term, general good, may be defined as the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected” (*Descent* 105). These terms can therefore be extended to many kinds of social animals other than humans, since “individuals” is a term not marked as belonging solely to humans, and make morality as much a matter of physical life as mental or spiritual. Like other writers who began to doubt the existence of God, Darwin was reluctant

to accept the soul-body split that Christianity endorsed, or think of the mortal flesh as a distraction or temptation for an immortal spirit. To have “full vigour and health, with all [the] faculties perfect,” makes no small part of an individual’s happiness in the non-transcendent world that Darwin is proposing. There is no certainty as to an afterlife to compensate earthly physical suffering with a higher bliss, and even if there was, few Christian writers endowed animals with a soul that would allow them to go there. For humans to share the fate of animals and descend from them, for animals to be related to humans, the promise of a healthy life is a promise that at least has a possibility of coming true.

The loss of God, of the sense of a firm and certain meaning to life, might seem too great a price to ask others to pay, even if Darwin, as an agnostic, was willing to pay it. But there are joys in the community of descent, “grandeur in this view of life” (*Origin* 429), that made Darwin unwilling to give up the notion, and not just the pleasure of having a clear argument that he himself had had a huge part in designing. The possibility for creating alternate visions of the good life visible in the passage above is one of them; the fact that we are not alone on this planet, or in the suffering and death we pass through, another. The removal of God from the equation does not leave us alone. It leaves us freer to appreciate the world around us and not only the life, as Darwin might have put it, but the lives.

Conclusion

Darwin’s anxiety about publication of his ideas, and the pain they would cause, was real. Without Alfred Russel Wallace’s input, Wallace’s biographer Ross A. Slotten has argued, Darwin, “cautious to a fault,” never would have made those ideas known in his lifetime; “[i]t was Wallace who forced Darwin to publish the *Origin of Species*; indeed, were it not for Darwin, the nineteenth century probably would be known as “Wallace’s Century”

[rather than Darwin's Century]" (Slotten 1). Although Darwin and Wallace drifted apart due to Wallace's interest in spiritualism and his eventual conviction" that he had found evidence of Mind or Intelligence behind natural laws, and of an Intelligent Designer manipulating those laws for a higher purpose: humanity's spiritual evolution after death" (Slotten 4), that was only after Darwin's even greater anxiety, over the potential loss of credit from posterity, had triumphed over his anxiety about the reception of his ideas. Perhaps, without Wallace, the "sketch" of his ideas that Darwin had showed a few friends in 1844 would only have emerged in 1882, when he died, and it would have remained up to other scientists to elaborate natural selection via experimentation and notes of their own.

Yet, in the end, the tension that Darwin's ideas stirred up even in him was not enough to make him abandon the project. Prodded into action, he presented, not a universally grim view of the origin of species and natural selection, but one full of joy and wonder. He might modify his language to make it less harsh, but this only argues that he was concerned to persuade others of the community of descent; he altered his metaphors, not his essential argument. When he felt more comfortable, he announced boldly in the title of *The Descent of Man* that he thought humanity was part of the same lineage as many other creatures. Kinship-in-difference remained paramount. A human is not a barnacle, and no one should know this better than Darwin, who spent eight years analyzing barnacles. On the other hand, neither is humanity alone in the universe, and Darwin does not permit our species to cling to even one of the supposedly uncrossable dividing lines that other thinkers set up as desperate fences against any resemblance to animals. Unhappiness (his and others') with aspects of his ideas could press down on Darwin and sometimes change how he wrote, but not how humanity was related. The difficult, delicate balancing act, that was so hard for even Darwin to keep in

mind in the face of all the minute variations among species human breeders and scientists liked to pay attention to, was still necessary.

And this was only in his public writings. In private writings, such as his letters, Darwin could go even further; it was in letters, for the most part, that he explained the death of his confident faith and the growth of his agnosticism, and in his *Autobiography*, written for his children, that he revealed his inability to cope with suffering and the idea that a benevolent God would have created a world full of it for no reason, whether it was the suffering of his beloved daughter Annie before her death at age ten or the suffering of animals. Darwin, as he declared in his *Autobiography*, published in full only in the twentieth century (the parts dealing with his loss of faith were suppressed by his family; it remained for his granddaughter Nora Barlow to restore the omissions) was revolted by the idea that animals, who lived by the same natural laws as humans and also were victims of disease and pain, might have been “designed” to meet only the human purposes of a test of faith.

Some have attempted to explain [suffering] in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement. A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time? This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one; whereas, as just remarked, the presence of much suffering agrees well with the view that all organic beings have been developed through variation and natural selection (Barlow 90).

He returns to natural selection, not as another faith but as a replacement, a “view,” and the existence of suffering among other animals is as compelling and important as the existence of suffering in humans. Humans and animals are akin in this as in so much else. There is no escape and no changing the existence of descent, even in a matter where one might wish that

one could. Surely a human filled with revulsion by suffering would have designed a better universe.

Suffering and death, therefore, *cannot* be explained “in reference to man.” Other animals exist in the world, and if they are different from humans in having different instincts—as Darwin accepted and stated in both *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*—then it cannot be assumed that they need that suffering as a test. Indeed, such a test would be impossible for them to pass. Nor can it be assumed that the suffering of the “lower animals”¹² is intended to serve as a visual lesson to humans who gaze on them; the “almost endless time” that this suffering has lasted included millions of years in which there were no humans on earth to watch the suffering. The God who could create such a world full of pointless pain and ignore it because only the “reference to man” was important is not a God Darwin’s understanding, his intellect or his imagination, can accept. It is much simpler to accept what natural selection says about suffering, that it is necessary to advance life and growth, and to discard the idea of a God who is as human-centered as humans themselves.

Darwin was wise enough to offer kinship as a theory he could support because he had so often studied and observed animals, but not to try to attempt a solution to “[t]he mystery of the beginning of all things[. It] is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic” (Barlow 94). His reasons for becoming so are linked to the same principles that led him to support natural selection in *The Origin* and *The Descent of Man*. If his theory did not need a God to support or explain it, something that had no support or explanation by the knowledge of humans must simply be placed *beyond* attempts to explain it, not supported with supernatural ones. At the same time, Darwin accepts that those explanations may

¹² Darwin returns to the terms of hierarchy here, as he tended to do in his later work; Desmond and Moore point out in *Darwin’s Sacred Cause* that he reinscribes a hierarchy of races in *The Descent*.

change—for example, if someone finds a theory that operates on all the same criteria as natural selection while explaining things better than it does, that theory will replace natural selection—and does not think of them as permanent, thus illustrating how thoroughly his theory’s lack of an end goal and an outside master had become integrated into his life. In natural selection, “Everything is the result of fixed laws” (Barlow 87). Darwin compares those laws to the course of the wind blowing. There are *explanations* for this; what there are not are fixed meanings or control. The wind may veer. But it will not do so because of supernatural intervention.

This acceptance of natural selection, the exiling of supernatural causes from the world, had some problems of its own; overturning "the mystery of mysteries" could make the world feel smaller, colder, less welcoming, as I explained in the introduction to this chapter. The lack of consolation made it a harder struggle for a doubtfully and unwillingly agnostic author to accept the inescapability of kinship with the world than for an author whose agnosticism was matter-of-fact or whose atheism verged on deliberately shocking anti-theism. I now turn to such a doubtfully agnostic author, George Eliot, whose monumental struggle with Darwin's ideas of kinship and the agnosticism connected with them—the impossibility of rejecting them, the harshness of accepting all their implications—as well as the way she gives the same struggle to her characters, is visible in several of her novels.

Chapter Three: ‘We Ought to Know About Our Fellow-Creatures’: George Eliot and the Tensions of Kinship

Introduction

In recounting the numerous and varied ways that George Eliot interacted with Darwinian evolutionary theory in her landmark book *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer notes that Eliot’s initial reaction to *The Origin of Species* was rather cool.

At first she simply sees Darwin as summarising [the ideas of other evolutionists] and giving them the weight of his scientific standing: she does not perceive the novelty of what he is doing. She does not grasp his insight into the major *mechanism* of evolutionary change: that of natural selection...It is an idea so much at variance with George Eliot’s own morality that it is not surprising that she did not immediately grasp its implications (146, emphasis in original).

When she did grasp Darwin’s insight, Eliot interwove evolutionary theory into her novels in a variety of ways; that variety is the major narrative Beer identifies and explores in her two chapters on Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. But a core of Eliot’s initial resistance remained. Her “own morality,” which Beer explains as contradictory to natural selection mainly because that selection is a “process which depends on the individual *happening* to accord with the needs of the environment and so surviving, and on minute random mutations which better fit the individual and his particular descendants for the world in which they live until that world changes and the advantage passes elsewhere” (146, emphasis in original), did not completely change to match some of the concepts of Darwinian kinship, and never would. At the same time, Eliot is unable to ignore Darwin’s ideas, and a large part of her work is a dedicated, principled struggle to come to terms with those disturbing implications.

In much the same way, Eliot is different from the other authors I describe in this book in her long struggle with the disturbing implications of her own agnosticism. She does resemble Darwin more than Meredith or Swinburne, both of whom put aside religion when they were younger than Eliot.¹³ But whereas Darwin agonized over the loss of his projected career as a clergyman and the controversy he would unleash by exposing his ideas, Eliot suffered the loss of an evangelical faith that had been strongly held, as well as a means of connecting her to some of her dearest friends. Although Avrom Fleishman notes that Eliot does not seem to have talked much about an afterlife or personal devotion to Jesus (16), she did hold a belief in God's special creation of and concern with humankind, and a permanent heaven (Fleishman 13). She also could write to her friend Martha Jackson in December of 1841, when she was only a few months away from the "Holy War" with her father that resulted from her open declaration of disbelief in the literalness of the Bible, "This beautiful world is given to us children of men as a trial-field indeed, a gymnasium wherein temperance and self-government are both means and ends, but withal as an Eden to dress and to keep with songs of adoration to the Giver. Each little plant, the very lichens that clothe the dead boughs, are lovely and useful, and a link that would be missed in the chain of being. And so we, dear Martha, have our place of usefulness and fitness." While this acknowledges the beauty of the natural world, it also places humans and other creatures firmly under the "Giver," as well as assuming that humans have a God-ordained place and meaning, that Earth is primarily important as a "trial-field" and "gymnasium" for something larger rather than in itself, and that the largely medieval concept of the chain of being still endures. These sound like embedded religious views that would find it hard to cope with Darwinian kinship, with

¹³ Meredith claimed to have been "quite a boy" when he last "swallowed the Christian fable" (cit. on Stevenson *Ordeal* 11, 14). The exact date of Swinburne's loss of faith is unknown, but almost certainly happened when he was at Oxford in his late teens.

laterality between humans and other beings rather than a strictly defined hierarchical relationship.

Yet Eliot did tell her father that the Scriptures are “histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction” (128), and her friend Francis Watts in April of 1842 that “...I cannot think the conviction that immortality is man’s destiny indispensable to the production of elevated and heroic virtue and the sublimest resignation” (136). Slowly, full of resistance, Eliot did become agnostic about an afterlife and the idea of Earth as a testing-ground for some trial elsewhere. Likewise, she absorbs some of Darwin’s ideas and uses them even as she keeps up her conviction that the outcome of those ideas may be tragic for the people who have to live in a world defined by them. Her agnosticism and her Darwinism intertwine, producing narratives full of conflict about kinship—human kinship, but also animal. Her most contested heroine, Maggie Tulliver, cannot escape the implications of her kinship with animals, particularly the fact that her father and brother associate her far more with these “lower beings” than they do with *human* beings, and that her world is one that does not make much space for animals. Yet religion, which could be an escape for Maggie in a less Darwinian narrative, if only emotionally, also fails her, and leaves both Maggie and her author with so few choices that death seems an escape. *The Mill on the Floss* is not the only or even the most “animalled” of the Darwinian narratives that Eliot writes, but it is the one that best showcases some of the implications of resistance to Darwinian ideas, how important they are and yet how impossible to rest easy with when one has grown up in a religious early Victorian environment.

Thus, although Eliot could and did produce joyous moments of animal kinship in her novels—even Maggie has them, and *Silas Marner’s* second half has an extended meditation

on the ways that Eppie, the protagonist's adopted child, connects him to other beings once more—the connection between humans and animals tends more, in her narratives, to the production of tragedy. Just as Maggie grows up and loses most of the connections she has with animals as she leaves her childhood behind, just as Silas loses his first sense of kinship (with a religious community, due to the treachery of his best friend) and is affected so deeply by it that he also cuts ties with animals and can only establish them with his household objects, so Darwin's kinship theory at once influenced Eliot and cut her off from a sense of surety that she might have continued to enjoy, even as an agnostic, in a world where humans still had their place in the chain of being above animals for lack of a well-explained and reputable alternative.¹⁴ Agnostics and atheists received a kind of certainty from Darwin's account, but those who had been strongly religious also lost a different kind, the security of the afterlife and a predestined place in the world. Eliot complained when she first read *The Origin* that “the Development theory and all explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes” (cit. on Ashton 31). That mystery was the question of creation, the question of God, which Darwin tried to keep out of his book as much as possible, but which others inevitably saw—the implications for ideas that would keep humans and animals separate as well as for the actual theory of special creation that Darwin opposed. Given Eliot's feelings of loss, it is remarkable that she managed to fill her novels with Darwinian theory as much as she did, and that animal kinship can be a source of joy to her characters, sometimes almost the only one available to them.

¹⁴ As Gillian Beer points out, accounts of “Development Theory” existed before Darwin, and Eliot was aware of them (146). However, they tended to have bad reputations, either in the sense of being revolutionary or in the sense of being popular but supported by apparently fantastical leaps of reasoning instead of scientific evidence, such as Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). Darwin's reputation as a pillar of the scientific establishment helped to guarantee the success of *The Origin of Species*.

For Eliot's characters, *acknowledgment* of that kinship is more difficult to attain than it is for Darwin, George Meredith's characters, or Swinburne's narrators. The characters live in worlds that do not encourage that kinship, and her narrators are themselves more distant figures than (especially) George Meredith's, who often intrude to remark ironically on his characters' faults, hint at their ultimate fates, and explain why they are mistaken about their perceptions. The sadness and sense of loss that pervade Eliot's agnosticism also mean she cannot pursue Swinburne's route, which combines his loss of faith with high glee at the loss, and joyful mockery of those who would deny basic facts like the non-existence of the afterlife. Eliot wrote to D'Albert Durade in December 1859, the year of *The Origin of Species*: "I think I hardly ever spoke to you of the strong hold Evangelical Christianity had over me from the age of fifteen to two and twenty and of the abundant intercourse I had had with earnest people of various religious sects...I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies" (cit. on Ashton 78-79). Eliot's sympathy and sorrow therefore create what is arguably a more complex vision of kinship than either Swinburne's or Meredith's, but also a chaotic and self-contradictory one. The characters who ignore kinship with animals entirely are still wrong, often less sympathetic than those who acknowledge it, but they have the power to hurt the more sympathetic characters by rejecting them and shunning them *because* the more sympathetic ones remind them of animals. When it comes to it, the people who acknowledge kinship may be cut off entirely from animals, or, in the extreme case of Silas, from kinship of any kind.¹⁵ Whereas in Meredith and Swinburne acknowledgment of kinship has the power to change the world, Eliot's characters must also have the right circumstances.

¹⁵ While Silas, of course, does rejoin the community when he adopts Eppie, it is notable that Eppie herself

This applies as well to her earlier and later work, novels like *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Indeed, though there are characters, like the anti-heroine Hetty in *Adam Bede*, who seem at first to be independent of any such connections to animals while still loved and admired by the people around them, the narrator of *Adam Bede* condemns Hetty both for not thinking “any loving thought of her second parents—of the children she had helped to tend” and for not thinking those thoughts of “any pet animal” (Chapter XV). Hetty is wrong for not feeling either of those sorts of love, even if the affection for a pet might be easier than affection for her adopted family.¹⁶ And Hetty ends her story in literal exile from the home she had lived in, and dies before she can return, although she was spared from death on-stage for abandoning the child she gave birth to. Proud independence from all other beings and having their love at the same time is impossible; Hetty does not actually possess it even if it might appear that she does at the beginning of the novel.

Dorothea Brooke, one protagonist of *Middlemarch*, has better circumstances than Hetty in that she is not so separated from animals, but she is so devoted to her overpowering religious faith that she can literally see little else. When her future brother-in-law, Sir James Chettam, offers her a Maltese puppy, Dorothea exclaims, “It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets,” and then tries to excuse her rough rejection of the puppy by explaining she is near-sighted and was always “afraid of treading on” a similar-sized terrier her sister kept in the past (Chapter 3). However, in reality Dorothea rejects the dog because Sir James has interrupted her contemplation about housing the villagers of Lowick and she is irritated with him, and the dog is a victim of her irritation; Dorothea loses

appears to have no kin, to appear “magically” in Silas’s house. Her mother is dead and her blood father unknown to her for over a decade. Only such a child, without parents or other family who might take her away, is free to join with Silas and pull him back into the community of descent.

¹⁶ The more complicated situation where Hetty might feel *one* of those sorts of affection and not the other, and what would happen in that case, admittedly does not arise in *Adam Bede*.

its possible companionship in a metaphorically near-sighted rejection of what it could be, only cloaked in high-sounding language. As Nina Auerbach points out, Dorothea refuses “the greatest prize the secular world of Middlemarch holds: the treasure of fellowship” (88). She might have used the Maltese dog, or the horse Sir James also offers her, to teach herself to look beyond her self-absorption and see animals as real beings instead of the “parasites” that she calls the Maltese (Chapter 3). Instead, she rejects both animals, and for the same reason, since further irritation at Sir James makes her tell him that she plans to give up riding (Chapter 1). That she never actually gives up riding, as well as has different dogs of her own, marks the rejection for what it is: a simple, thoughtless reaction to the *man* who offers them and keeps interrupting her supposedly high-flown thoughts, rather than actually seeing the animals for what they are.

Eventually, Dorothea learns better and manages to get beyond both her self-absorption and her religious visions to empathize with a dog. Looking out a window, she finds herself akin to, not separate from, a shepherd’s dog; “in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining” (Chapter 80). However, it takes her almost the whole book to do so, and she does not achieve the joyous, extended kinship with animals that happens for Silas, or that happens for Maggie in her childhood. Her only pet appears to be a sheepdog called Monk, who Dorothea has few scenes with, and while she is fond of riding, her individual horses are not named and her relationship with them is not described. Even for what is arguably Eliot’s most popular

heroine, kinship is a reward at the end of a hard struggle, not a fact that can be simply and easily absorbed into the human mind. The attraction of religion and a “grand life” for Dorothea, although in the end she loses her faith and that grand life never materializes, compete for her attention with kinship and the humbler pleasures of a pet’s companionship.

While *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* offer intriguing perspectives on kinship, I have chosen to concentrate on the novels that do the most to demonstrate both Eliot’s resistance to Darwinism and what is lost with that resistance, and the joy that can absorb a human being who in turn is absorbed into the larger rhythms of the community of descent. *The Mill on the Floss* depicts an intensely Darwinian world where the characters ignore enough ties to animals that their kinship only appears in fleeting moments which cannot form a continuing pattern of knowledge. This exemplifies the loss of a spiritual meaning that Eliot saw as inevitably coming along with deconversion; the meaning that *could* replace faith, the companionship with animals that can make this world enough, never makes enough inroads on the characters’ psyches, leaving them lost in a world neither religious nor agnostic. *Silas Marner*, on the other hand, shows a character who is lost within himself, but eventually finds his way back to kinship with the help of a child who is herself learning about animals. Both books depict, also, how the characters’ religious attitudes become more of a hindrance to finding their place along the continuum of knowledge than a help, because of the separation that the Christianity available to them always implies between its adherents and other beings; while Eliot’s personal sympathy with religion means that very few of her strongly Christian characters (as opposed to those who have let their faith lapse into ennui) are evil, they retain the faults as well as the strengths of their outlook when dealing with animals.

The Shadow of Kinship: *The Mill on the Floss*

The Mill on the Floss is controversial for both its ending and its heroine, Maggie, who some critics feel George Eliot's narrator was too insistent on trying to make the reader love (Ashton 69). Maggie dies at the end in rescuing her brother Tom, in a way that can seem both nonsensical—the flood that drowns her and Tom arrives literally in conjunction with a prayer Maggie makes and is often seen as not being adequately foreshadowed—and too convenient, in that it frees Maggie from having to deal with the conflicts with her family and her whole town of St. Ogg's, caused by her having apparently eloped with, then refusing to actually marry, her cousin Lucy's fiancé Stephen. *Mill* is also the novel in which the clash between Eliot's sympathy for religion and her acknowledgment of kinship is displayed most openly; “[i]nterestingly, especially with reference to *The Mill on the Floss*, [Eliot] often exercised her large mind in illustrating and analyzing the very life of her past—provincial, traditional, pious—against which she had, alone among her family, rebelled” (Ashton 3). Maggie's deep unhappiness with her family, keen intellect that causes problems with her family and society's conventional attitudes about women, and longing for a brother who has cut her off¹⁷ come close to duplicating the situation of the young Marian Evans, adding the uncertainty of biographical criticism to the picture; how much are we justified in assuming we know, how closely can we relate heroine and author?

If we cannot point to Maggie as a portrait of the young George Eliot—and there are many ways in which it would be foolish to try—we can point to her as a portrait of a young woman whose allegiance to her family and her religion vies with her allegiance to animals. Maggie, kin to animals in childhood, caring for them, worrying about them, deeply ashamed

¹⁷ In the case of George Eliot herself, her brother Isaac cut off contact with her when he found out she was living with her partner George Lewes and only resumed it in the last year of her life, after she had married John Cross.

when her neglect kills some of them, becomes the woman who tries to martyr herself to deal with her father's lack of understanding of her intellect and her brother's contempt for her choices and the way she reminds him of animals (and arguably her mother's wish for a different kind of daughter, although Maggie spends less time thinking or worrying about her mother). Maggie leaves animals behind both literally and metaphorically, but never achieves a complete separation from them, troubling her family and conventional St. Ogg's with an ambiguity that is similar to that created by her situation with Stephen. However, the world that Eliot imagined so well, what Rosemary Ashton calls "the provincial, traditional, pious" world of the Midlands of England, itself militates against Maggie being able to pursue her interest in other species and against the similarities that link her to that animal world being accepted in a positive way. Maggie is a victim of Victorian attitudes towards domestic animals, in particular dogs. While Harriet Ritvo points out that many English Victorians saw dogs as the noblest of beasts, supposedly docile, loving even if punished, and possessing instinctive and utterly willing obedience (20-22), Martin Danahay notes the similarities between dogs (and other companion animals such as cats and caged birds) and women and children—they were supposedly part of the family, yet hard to protect from in-home violence (98-9). Maggie does not suffer physical violence from her father and brother, unlike some of the animals in the novel.¹⁸ However, she does suffer emotional neglect and constant undervaluation; she is not what her father and Tom want. And her kinship to animals lies close to the heart of why she disappoints them.

Maggie cannot simply stop being akin to animals and become fully human that way, however. Ambiguity is essential to what she is. One of the earliest descriptions she receives

¹⁸ Mr. Tulliver and Tom are not presented as heavily abusive toward animals, but more casually careless of them: throwing a stone they may not mean to land, yelling for an imaginary disobedience.

is a “small mistake of nature” (*Mill* 5). Written into her body directly from the beginning, then—especially her hair, about which her mother despairs—is the idea that Maggie is not what she is supposed to be, and that it is nature’s fault. Anything that makes her more “natural” can therefore be seen as a threat. Maggie is also “a Skye terrier suspecting mischief” (*Mill* 6) when Tom might be mentioned or threatened, and like “a Skye terrier escaped from his bath” (*Mill* 14). A Skye terrier has hair that hangs in front of its eyes, the superficial source of both the resemblance and the metaphor. This might seem enough to be going on with. However, Maggie also receives comparisons to other animals besides the Skye terrier early in the book, like the “Shetland pony” whose mane her hair also resembles (*Mill* 5). She is not only dog or companion animal, but horse, and thus heir to another set of complex Victorian attitudes about horses, who were not pets of the home in the way that dogs were. Martin Danahay classifies horses as domestic animals that the public saw as likely to be peaceful and liable to being abused, but also points out the ambiguity in their portrayal; while newspaper articles and paintings rarely attributed violence to dogs, the public was familiar with cavalry mounts and other war horses and expected to see at least some visions of them as at home among horrors rather than in the sanctified interior of the domesticated house (Danahay 106, 104). Maggie’s Shetland pony nature is similarly ambiguous, despite a history mostly devoid of such ponies as soldiers’ mounts; small in stature, the ponies are nevertheless hairy in a wild and arguably barbarous way, not like a Skye terrier who could be hairy but still neatly groomed, or even the dog escaped from his bath whose hair may temporarily be in a matted and disarrayed condition. Shetland ponies are a native British breed, without the lures or dangers of an “exotic” animal, but they are also native to the northern Scottish islands, wild and inhospitable places. The International

Museum of the Horse, discussing the origin of the Shetland pony, explains that the ponies “had to live on bad grass, hard, wet ground, and in the continual path of the driving wind. The cold climate encouraged them to conserve body heat — the resulting pony had short limbs, a short back, a thick neck, and small ears. Big stock starved; fragile stock broke; only the small, quick, hardy, and intelligent animals survived.” This is a long way from what Danahay calls the home as “the site of peace and security” (103), and “small, quick, hardy, and intelligent” is not a bad description of Maggie. She is at once akin to a pet dog who needs attention and grooming and a sturdy pony bred for horse-breaking work. She is not simple but multifarious, akin to many species, not only one. That these metaphors occur readily to other people does not endear her to her parents, or to Tom, the one person in the world Maggie most wishes to receive affection from. It only helps take her further from what they wish her to be. Kinship to animals is, in this world of utter refusal to acknowledge it, separation from human beings.

To add to the many confusions of Maggie’s portrayal, as well as the domestic animals she is akin to, there is also a strain of wild, foreign animals that Danahay argues the Victorian public was more willing to associate with violence (106). Maggie can imagine those animals in a way that few other characters in the book, including her brother and father, do. She reads a book on “Kangaroos and things” (*Mill* 11)¹⁹ and uses the same book to try and appeal to her father’s handyman, Luke. Baffled by his lack of interest in people of other nations, she insists, “But they’re our fellow-creatures, Luke—we ought to know about our fellow-creatures” (*Mill* 15), adding another dimension to her family’s discomfort with her; alone in the book, Maggie is interested in people of other nations and perhaps other races, her mind as

¹⁹ It is notable that Danahay does not include kangaroos, or indeed any Australian animals, on his axis of peaceful/violent and foreign/domestic, because they had not made as big an inroad on the Victorian public’s consciousness at the time. This renders Maggie’s interest in them the more literally outlandish.

well as her looks taking on a “foreign” tint. When Luke still declines to pay attention, she tries to find another way to interest him, talking about the animals in the book, “elephants and kangaroos, and the civet-cat, and the sunfish, and a bird sitting on its tail,—I forget its name. There are countries full of those creatures, instead of horses and cows, you know. Shouldn't you like to know about them, Luke?” (*Mill* 15). Luke does not take an interest in these animals, either, much to Maggie’s bafflement and discomfort. While his reaction fits into the complex of Victorian attitudes to animals that Danahay discusses—the animals of other countries are less interesting than native British ones—his lack of curiosity is also an effective bar to kinship with any kind of animal, domestic or foreign, tame or wild, and part of it can be traced to his religion.

Luke admits that he has not read any book except the Bible “and not much o’ that” (*Mill* 16). When Maggie is distressed about her own neglect having caused Tom’s rabbits to die of starvation, Luke tries to comfort her by telling her that the rabbits are unnatural because they are human-bred lop-ears, and “Things out o’ natur niver thrive. God A’mighty doesn’t like ‘em” (*Mill* 16). This calm acceptance of nature as a divinely ordered complex, with animals that are “out o’ natur” dying and not to be regretted, clashes sharply with both Maggie’s attitude of increased knowledge and her interest in animals that are described in biological and illustrative terms rather than as being created by “God A’mighty.” It also contrasts with Maggie’s concern for even very small creatures that other humans might find to be nuisances, such as her worries whether families of spiders living inside and outside the mill will be able to communicate with one another (*Mill* 15), and, if Maggie *is* a “small mistake of nature,” might also place her in the position of one of those animals that God doesn’t like, exiling her beyond one limit of conventional religion. While Maggie is no saint

in her relation to animals, since she does neglect the rabbits, she has a much better chance at acknowledging the existence of these relations than most other characters, given her wide imagination, her interest in animals as something other than market commodities or signs from God, and her tendency to assume that “fellow-creatures” of all kinds, including humans from other nations, should be known about simply as a matter of course.

Maggie also pays better attention to some of her other pet animals than she does to the rabbits. When she sees “Yap, the queer white-and-brown terrier, with one ear turned back, trotting about and sniffing vaguely, as if he were in search of a companion,” she immediately runs down to join him, and invites him to join her, as well, in celebrating her brother’s imminent return, by “singing as she whirled, “Yap, Yap, Tom's coming home!” while Yap danced and barked round her, as much as to say, if there was any noise wanted he was the dog for it” (*Mill* 14). Her kinship is reflected, then, in companionship with a literal dog as well as through the metaphors that compare her to a Skye terrier; Yap too is a terrier, though not of the same type. In this she treats Yap better than Tom, who, after an argument with Maggie over a jam puff, “jumped down from his bough, and threw a stone with a “hoigh!” as a friendly attention to Yap, who had also been looking on while the eatables vanished, with an agitation of his ears and feelings which could hardly have been without bitterness” (*Mill* 26). Tom is casually thoughtless to Yap, not really meaning to hurt him but also not allowing Yap a place in his mental or emotional life as Maggie does; he shares neither his emotions nor the “eatables” with him, while the first time that Yap appears by name in the story, he and Maggie share the dance. Tom, like Luke, is offered the chance to participate in this world of kinship through an animal that exists independently of his attitudes toward Maggie, but turns away.

Yap and Maggie, meanwhile, share other qualities. Both adore Tom in spite of his shortcomings. The narrator tells us that immediately after Tom throws the stone, “the excellent dog accepted Tom's attention with as much alacrity as if he had been treated quite generously,” and a bit later Yap attacks Tom’s friend Bob Jakin for fighting with Tom (*Mill* 26, 28). This plays up the similarities between women and domestic animals examined by Danahay and acknowledged by some Victorian artists by placing such animals as dogs or cats in their paintings as potential symbols of male violence toward women. The stereotype of the home as peaceful led to much sweeping under the rug of domestic violence, but animals could be a way of speaking indirectly about it (Danahay 98). Maggie does not receive physical abuse from Tom in the same way that a typical Victorian fallen woman or beaten wife would, and neither does Yap, since the stone does not land. But both are neglected emotionally by Tom, and both remain attached to him anyway, in the devotion named as stereotypical of the dog and expected of Angels of the House. Maggie’s kinship to animals here is another way of binding her to her brother, but since Tom shoves both her and Yap away and declines to spend much thought or kindness on them, this is another instance in which Maggie’s undeniable kinship only drives her further from her family. The bond goes only one way, and does not make a community of humans so much as an exile from the community of humans who turn their backs on the community of descent.

Yap, however, stereotypically or not, can accept his treatment by Tom and not ask for more. A separation between Maggie and animals appears when the narrator describes Maggie’s reaction to her argument with Tom, which is unlike that “excellent dog’s”: “But Maggie, gifted with that superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being, and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee, sat still on her bough,

and gave herself up to the keen sense of unmerited reproach” (*Mill* 26). This indicates both the lack of absolute identity between Maggie and Yap, despite their similar relationships with Tom, and an apparent separation that the narrator herself imposes. Chimpanzees, among the apes generally considered brutish and dangerous by the Victorian middle class (Danahay 106), are left comfortably behind, and even a small miserable girl has a “proud distance” from them. Maggie, then, may seem no more than a powerless and pitiable being subject to the whims of her culture, a girl to be mistreated like a dog by her older and more powerful brother, and meanwhile comforting herself that at least *she* is not an animal. The specific references to apes and chimpanzees could also have the effect of Maggie distancing herself from specifically Darwinian insights into human heritage; though Darwin left the mention of human-ape relationships out of *The Origin of Species*, enough people could read between the lines for Samuel Wilberforce to taunt T. H. Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” about being related to an ape in the year *The Mill on the Floss* was published. If Maggie is capable of greater kinship, she also seems capable of greater separatism.

However, the key to reading this passage lies in the final phrase, the “keen sense of unmerited reproach.” Maggie’s separatism, like Luke’s, springs ultimately from a religious source, if one less open than Luke’s calm acceptance of the rabbits’ death based on God disliking “things out o’ natur.” Maggie’s martyrdom, as Paul Yeoh notes, is a theme running throughout the book. Buried, perhaps, for a modern audience less accustomed to the conventions of hagiographical narration, it is nevertheless present. Maggie not only finds comfort in imitating the *Imitation of Christ* later in the book; she also finds comfort in submerging herself in that “unmerited reproach” in a way that she cannot if she thinks she

has willingly done something wrong.²⁰ Yeoh argues that Maggie turns Tom directly into her persecutor, the one who martyrs her, and that she is an egoist, although a self-limiting one (5). When Maggie believes that she is suffering *merited* reproach, she cannot make Tom into a persecutor, because she is too busy castigating herself, and tries instead to apologize to Tom; something similar happens when she suffers from the ostracism of everyone in St. Ogg's at the end of the book because of her "elopement" with Stephen, because although she maintains her principled rejection of Stephen, she cannot escape the conviction that she has upset and hurt others such as her cousin Lucy and her friend and would-be lover Philip Wakem, and so suffers (Barrett 65). In the conviction of martyrdom, however, she can ennoble herself not only above Tom but above anyone else, including the animals that have formed an inclusive web of kinship around her in some parts of the story. Chimpanzees and dogs do not suffer that reproach or feel as bad as Maggie, but they do suffer, in this novel, that ostracism from the human community because of the larger human community's refusal to acknowledge its relatives. Ultimately, in her suffering, Maggie resembles those animals even if she thinks of herself as special and different. Once again, there is no possible escape for her in delving into her feelings, or into martyrdom, because Maggie herself is too aware of other possibilities, of explanations and ties to "fellow-creatures;" she cannot cast Tom in the role of a persecutor forever any more than she can abandon animals without a pang. Maggie aspires to various roles, including saint, martyr, beloved little sister, beloved daughter, and friend to animals, but it is only at the last that she succeeds—even as this role also causes the characters who associate her with animals to turn their backs on her.

²⁰ Witness, for example, Maggie's anxiety not to take the half of the jam puff that has more jam away from Tom (*Mill* 25). Maggie often finds herself in trouble without knowing exactly how she got there, but if she believes that she *would* be doing something unfair—in this case, eating a bigger portion of the puff—she avoids it with as great a dexterity as she can. The care that she puts into trying to avoid Tom's anger is the major reason she later finds Tom's reproach about the puff "unmerited."

Darwinian kinship and refusal to acknowledge that kinship both act as strong restraints on Maggie, pulling her in different directions every time she tries to commit to a new role.

The fleeting moments of joy that Maggie shares, and her deeper sorrow, are counterpointed by moments when she *might* have had joy, but feels compelled, mostly for reasons relating to her family, to reject it. When Bob Jakin, who as a boy felt contempt for Maggie and Tom's dog Yap because he wasn't any good at rat-catching (*Mill* 28), but has matured into a man who understands the value of dogs as companions, offers to get Maggie a puppy, he's not shy about where *he* thinks dogs fall along a hierarchy comparable to some humans: "'Hev a dog, Miss!—they're better friends nor any Christian'" (*Mill* 168). It is, then, specifically Christians rather than the more general noun "people" that dogs are superior to, perhaps reflecting Bob's suspicion of religious people he has met who have not behaved graciously to him because of his class. Maggie refuses in terms that make it clear it is not because she does not want the puppy, but because someone else would forbid her from having it, and that the same family member or members forbid her from having a closer relationship with Yap as well. While "We have a yard dog, and I mayn't keep a dog of my own" cuts off a possible future companionship and kinship with a puppy, it also turns Yap into a "yard dog," a dog specifically outside the home, which he hasn't been referred to as before. If Maggie is to remain confined inside the home in the manner of a typical Victorian woman, Yap is to be separated from her by the walls. However, Yap also inherits the freedom that belonged to Maggie when, as a child, she went outside to dance with him or to run away to find gypsies. Now, as Maggie grows away from childhood, both space and social conventions separate her from Yap. Maggie might have found the love and acceptance she is seeking in a puppy of her own, who might have been able to join her indoors, but she never

has a chance to learn if this is true. Once again, kinship is acknowledged only in the most painful and glancing of moments, here in a hypothetical that Bob Jakin is, besides Maggie, the only one to notice the possibility of.

It is significant, however, that Maggie *does* have a chance at a relationship with a single named dog. Writing about a unique animal can pierce through the fog that surrounds us when we talk too much about animals in the plural (Kuzniar 5). It is also significant that Yap is a “queer white cur with [a] brown ear” (*Mill* 2), not a specific breed like the Skye terrier that Maggie is often compared to. Bob Jakin, representing a system of values that has some authority since he is the most knowledgeable in-story character speaking on dogs in the book, values mixed-breed mutts much more than purebreds; he tells Maggie that both the “most sensible bitch” he knows and the man who despises her are mongrels, but the man doesn’t have the sense to see that about himself or value the dog (*Mill* 169). This “most sensible bitch” is the mother of the puppy that Bob offers Maggie. Maggie’s actual dog, her potential dog, and Maggie herself are all crossbreeds, mongrels, that didn’t turn out to look exactly like the breeders planned them to; the older generation wants to “breed” new young generations, but the younger generation, instead, turns into individuals with unique natures, not reproductions of the older one (Corbett 140). Maggie is a disappointment to her father as the mongrel bitch is to the man Bob Jakin describes, because her father thinks an intelligent woman will not fare well in the market that he sees the world as; still, Mr. Tulliver figuratively shakes his head over Maggie and doesn’t try to analyze why his “breeding” of children failed (Corbett 132). Once again, a member of Maggie’s family is unwilling to engage in thinking about animals long enough to understand them. The lack of curiosity prevails to the point that Mr. Tulliver gives up on understanding his children and consigns

everything to a sort of mystery, not religious as much as a conviction that the world is simply dead-set against him and his children are part of that.

This attitude is the opposite of the one among interested breeders that Darwin describes in the first few chapters of *The Origin of Species*. Breeders, he says, are often at a loss to explain certain inherited traits in animals, but that does not stop them from trying. Darwin encourages the idea of explanations, and, as usual, humility in the face of the idea's difficulty, because breeding is inherently unpredictable. While one form of the question is "How could a savage possibly know, when he first tamed an animal, whether it would vary in succeeding generations?" (*Origin* 17) and thus might seem to imply that ignorance comes from whether a breeder is "primitive" or not, Darwin also does not exempt breeders of his own time and class from being wrong. He believes, specifically, that they are wrong about every subtype of domestic animal having emerged from a different wild stock; they are so "strongly impressed with the difference between the several races" that they assume separate wild origins are the only way to explain them (*Origin* 29). As usual, Darwin also includes himself among those who have to struggle to keep the idea of kinship in mind. He bred pigeons as part of his study of inherited variation, and "felt fully as much difficulty in believing that [different fancy breeds of pigeon] could ever have descended from a common parent, as any naturalist could in coming to a similar conclusion in regard to the many species of finches, or other large groups of birds, in nature" (*Origin* 28). Thus, it is not surprising that Maggie is different from her parents or her parents' wishes, when even skilled animal breeders often misunderstand what variations mean and are startled by the appearance of a variety or trait they didn't intend among their stock. What makes Mr. Tulliver's attitude a problem, other than the common tendency in the book to deprecate any resemblance of

humans to animals, is that he simply sets Maggie down as a disappointment instead of retaining the open attitude of wonder or questioning that Darwin thinks breeders need to have.

Maggie does have advantages that her father does not see. She is closer to the “sensible” dog world than the “thoroughbreds” Bob despises and that her father apparently wanted to create, the thoroughbred Dodson daughter who would be unintelligent and a good housekeeper and the thoroughbred Tulliver son who would be canny and knowledgeable about business. Maggie has the potential for both the intelligence that her father and pure-bred dog-breeders didn’t foresee in their accidental creations, and kinship and happiness with those dogs. Despite Bob being the more knowledgeable about intelligent and loyal dogs themselves, Maggie is more thoroughly aligned with them by the narrator. It is potential that she cannot exploit in such a world as she inhabits, however, a world turned away from animal kinship in determined ignorance. Besides the attitudes of her immediate family, this has largely to do with the human town around Maggie insisting on thinking of itself as something larger and finer than not only animals but also other humans. The famous passage that describes the origins of the Dodsons, Tullivers, and others of their stripe at the beginning of Book IV emphasizes how this thinking is a failure, itself not grand and noble but part of “oppressive narrowness”:

It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons... Observing these people narrowly... one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet toward something beautiful, great, or noble; you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live,—with this rich plain where the great river flows forever onward, and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world’s mighty heart (*Mill* 162-63).

Despite the "pagan" belief of the Dodsons and Tullivers (who, here, are united as one kindred, without the class barriers that the Dodsons believe separate them and the different kind of heritage that Mr. Tulliver believes does) and the usual association of pagans with the country, this is a portrait of a people self-exiled from nature. They do not understand it or wish to pay attention to it. Nor does "something beautiful, great, or noble" lift them up into a refined realm of culture that sets up a barrier because they are enjoying a life of the mind that finds no (acknowledged) resonance in the physical world. Worst of all, as "out of keeping with the earth on which they live," they no longer fit their environment, the place where they live and which formed them—and the usual fate of an organism without a proper environment is extinction. If the Dodsons and Tullivers avoid this, they still have the high probability of mental exile from the actual physical world awaiting them. A turning away and abandonment of the clear facts of plain and river, the "links" between their small place and the wider countryside of which it is a part, deforms the mental life as it constrains the physical one. And the Tullivers and Dodsons will likely never find a pathway through the complexities of kinship, no way to acknowledge that they are related to each other or their world, because they believe that they move through their own separate worlds even in a small town. Even though the narrator neatly puts them in the place of organisms, specifically social insects with the reference to "emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers" (*Mill* 163), they absolutely refuse to notice any similarities to animals that actually exist. What chance, then, does Maggie have among them?

This passage points out, as well, the limited chance that Christian religion has to make a positive impact among the people of Maggie's environment. Yeoh may be right that Maggie's martyrdom provides material for a better life among those who survive her and

remember her as a good influence, her would-be suitor Phillip and her cousin Lucy primarily, with Stephen also counting to a certain extent, and conquers their unbelief in human goodness (13). However, it seems Maggie's "sacrifice" (Yeoh 14) in effect enables Philip and Lucy to martyr themselves (Yeoh 15), and it's not entirely clear whom their sacrifices, in turn, will benefit. An unending chain of martyrdoms that only produces more martyrs seems to have no clear goal, and, if Maggie's martyrdom is largely caused not so much by her death as by her unsuccessful attempts at happiness while alive, as Yeoh also argues, then it is not clear why Lucy and Phillip would count in the same category, since they seem to be happier. The message, which Yeoh sees as Christian in trappings and references even if ultimately secular, remains confused and uncertain. This does not touch the moments of happiness that Maggie *does* achieve, largely through association with kindred, either animals or her brother Tom. The "narrow" life of Tullivers and Dodsons has no place for clear Christianity, but also no place for her non-Christian kinship. It is not so much secular as what the narrator calls it, "stifled" and "dull." It is no alternative to Darwinian thought such as Victorian Christianity and belief in special creation were, but only another chaotic, unilluminated attempt to cope with the world by closing their eyes to it.

Because of this ignorance on the part of others and the resentment of other people when she reminds them of animals, Maggie has no escape from either human kinship or animal kinship; she is conditioned by the "oppressive narrowness" that has acted "on the lives of Tom and Maggie,—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts" (*Mill* 163). Those fibres locate kinship in the body even more than the mind, so that Maggie is

bound and must put aside thoughts of transcendence. But that human kinship is also denied her, by her father's assessment of her intelligence as useless to him, by Tom's rejection of her throughout most of their lives, even by her mother's reflection that Maggie's cousin Lucy should have been her daughter instead of Maggie (*Mill* 35). That these reflections are often associated with literal animals or animal metaphors only makes the denial of kinship all the more complete. Whether Maggie is being assessed as a sheep who will not make money for her father, an "inferior animal," or as a "rough, dark, overgrown puppy," (*Mill* 35), she is being placed beyond the pale that her family members wanted, expected, or hoped for. Neither can she suppress those signs of kinship with animals. She cannot suppress her intelligence and become the housekeeper that her father wants, any more than a "long-tailed sheep" can be born without a tail. She cannot stop being Tom's little sister, and she cannot, perhaps most profoundly of all, stop being kin to dogs, the bond most constantly reinforced throughout the text. Maggie is kin to animals as are all the other people within St. Ogg's, but she is the one most punished for showing it, especially because she does not have the decency to pretend it doesn't exist.

Animal comparisons do start to fade out in the second half of the book, although they still occur when Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest, both men who court Maggie, see her eyes as animal-like. Her eyes "remind [Phillip Wakem] of the stories about princesses being turned into animals" (*Mill* 106), and when Stephen is trying to seduce her, there is a moment when "she open[s] her eyes full on his for an instant, like a lovely wild animal timid and struggling under caresses, and then turn[s] sharp round toward home again" (*Mill* 273). Thus, Maggie's expression when forced to submit to Stephen's kiss resembles "signs of fear in both humans and beasts" that Darwin writes about (Michie 158). But these comparisons have less

force than they do earlier in the novel, when Maggie is constantly a puppy, a pony, and a terrier. Ultimately, turning away does not save Maggie from Stephen; she is, at least in the mind of the town of St. Ogg's, mastered by him sexually and then refuses to decently acknowledge that mastery and marry him. Elsie Michie points out that Stephen chases down Maggie while riding on a horse, and this helps to show his dominance, since the figure of the man astride the horse in a Victorian novel is often a figure of sexual power, likely to be upper-class and thus desirable to women, as well as holding a "noble" beast like the horse under control (157). Maggie and the horse are both forced to obey Stephen's will. Maggie's kinship with the horse here does not give her joy, and even does not *add* to her unhappiness; the comparison amplifies it, but does not cause it. It is merely a contributing factor to her sense of entrapment.

That entrapment is visible early in *The Mill on the Floss*, specifically in the attitudes of Maggie's parents and brother. Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver discuss their children in terms of the breeding, or crossbreeding, already mentioned between the Tullivers and Mrs. Tulliver's birth family, the Dodsons. Mr. Tulliver wishes Maggie could be more docile and sweet like her mother, while her brother Tom, who seems stolid and not overly intelligent, could be more like a Tulliver (that is, clever). Maggie is also discussed in terms of her market value ("...but an over 'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep—she'll fetch none the bigger price of that" (*Mill* 4)). Mr. Tulliver's anxiety displays simultaneously his care for Maggie's happiness—he honestly does not believe that an intelligent woman will find joy in the world he perceives around him—and what for him is a reduction, not an elevation, of her to animal status. Animals for Mr. Tulliver are not companions or kin, nor even partners on the farm; they are a synonym for money. A long tail would not necessarily have any effect on

a sheep's well-being. It might, in fact, fall into the category of variations that Darwin called "neither useful nor injurious," and so "would not be affected by natural selection" (*Origin* 52). Similarly, Maggie's intelligence may not have much effect on her ultimate fate, and might be permitted to flourish unhindered, at least if it really *is* like the long tail on the sheep.

However, Mr. Tulliver is too concerned with the failure of his plans to create the children he desired to see Maggie's intelligence this way. He reveals to his friend Riley, whom he consults about his son's education, that he deliberately chose his wife because she was weak-willed and he thought she would be good at household management, but he didn't want her to have the brains of her sisters (*Mill* 7). Maggie, in Mr. Tulliver's view, ought to have been a perfect portrait of her mother, while Tom ought to have followed his father. In this, Mr. Tulliver is exactly like the animal breeders Darwin wrote about, who could not always predict the outcome of their crosses, no matter how careful, as they did not understand the mechanisms of inheritance. There is no way for either Mr. Tulliver or breeders in general to plan for the future (*Corbett* 122). Mr. Tulliver, however, unlike a breeder who might be able to eventually adapt to the uncertainty by breeding more animals, cannot accept this. He made one gamble and lost, and the failure is perhaps the biggest that dogs him throughout the book, casting Maggie at once in that mode of that "small mistake of nature" (*Mill* 5). If she cannot earn money for her father or take a proper subordinate place in his world, she is useless to him, even though her intelligence might make her a suitable companion; this is one consequence, I would claim, not so much of seeing Maggie as an animal, but of not seeing animals as kin.

Mr. Tulliver's method of treating his horse is emblematic of his attitude toward Maggie; "Mr. Tulliver gave his horse a little stroke on the flank, then checked it, and said

angrily, "Stand still with you!" much to the astonishment of that innocent animal" (*Mill* 48). The caress and then the anger is a common occurrence with Maggie and Tom, playing together and then rejection, as I will discuss below. Mr. Tulliver also caresses and then checks his horse immediately after his much poorer sister, Mrs. Moss, has told him that she hopes her sons will always remember and love their sisters, while Mr. Tulliver thinks his nieces should "turn out and fend for themselves" (*Mill* 48). Maggie does not live out the independent fantasy her father is dreaming of for her at this moment, and perhaps could not; she still needs trust and love, and she acknowledges the ties of human kinship while her brother *does* try to forget about her later in the novel, turning her out after he believes she has eloped with Stephen. But she lives out the reality of Mr. Tulliver's treatment of his horse. Like the horse that Stephen masters when riding her down later in the novel,²¹ Maggie receives both caresses and checks from her father, and her usual response is astonishment. Mr. Tulliver is proud of her intelligence at times, particularly because Maggie takes more after him than Tom does, but he also constantly keeps the image of the long-tailed sheep in the back of his mind, with the result that Maggie-as-sheep is not Maggie-as-kin, but the innocent animal he at once caresses and spurns.

Tom also, from the very beginning of his childhood, places Maggie in the category of the other animals of the farmyard and the household, and thus makes her a candidate for his domination. He shows less love for Maggie than their father does, however, offering the check without the caress.

In very tender years, when [Tom] still wore a lace border under his outdoor cap, he was often observed peeping through the bars of a gate and making minatory gestures with his small forefinger while he scolded the sheep with an inarticulate burr, intended to strike terror into their astonished minds;

²¹ Michie notes that Maggie has, in fact, fled to her Aunt Moss's house to hide when Stephen comes seeking her.

indicating thus early that desire for mastery over the inferior animals, wild and domestic, including cockchafers, neighbors' dogs, and small sisters, which in all ages has been an attribute of so much promise for the fortunes of our race (*Mill* 55).

Here Maggie is distanced from Tom and aligned with animals in two senses: by being described and named as an animal, while Tom is named with specifically human body parts, such as “forefinger,” and in terms of his clothes, infantine but human; and by being placed in the list with “cockchafers and neighbors’ dogs.” Tom seeing Maggie as an animal might not be a problem if he could acknowledge animals as kin, and embrace Maggie other than during scattered moments in their childhood and at the moment of their shared death. But he cannot, and he divides the world between animal and human, female and male, Maggie and him. Maggie’s moments of separatism and “the superior powers of misery” that supposedly distinguish her from a chimpanzee early in the book collapse in the face of her male family members’ insistence on seeing her as an animal. They also see “animal” as a term of degradation, even though the narrator does not. (Note that the narrator refers to the “inferior animals” in the passage above, rather than “animals.” Tom himself may see a gulf yawning between him and the sheep, cockchafers, dogs, and sisters, but the narrator sees the bond that is still there, no matter how much ignored). This leads to a lowering of Maggie’s status in the eyes of most who pay attention to her.

The relationship between Maggie and her mother is similar in some respects, yet different given the narrator’s use of animal metaphors that do not apply as often to Tom and Mr. Tulliver. While Maggie is far more intelligent than her mother and stronger of will, her mother, too, is cast in the mode of the animal by the narrator. Describing her ability to contend for more money for Tom and Maggie to inherit, the narrator says, “Mrs. Tulliver was a mild woman, but even a sheep will face about a little when she has lambs” (*Mill* 23). The

narrator, then, sees sheep in a different mode than the purely monetary one ascribed to them by Mr. Tulliver, and opens up the possibility of turning “sheepishness” from an insult into a virtue, that of defensive mother love. Mrs. Tulliver is also compared to a hen in the title of Chapter VII of Part Three, “How a Hen Takes to Stratagem.” In this case, her intervention is far less successful, exposing secrets to her husband’s enemy that Mr. Tulliver would prefer not to have known—and since she does not think of *herself* as a hen, this is arguably less than the inclusivity that comes from a conscious acknowledgment of kinship with animals such as Maggie has. But Mrs. Tulliver, in the end, is also happier and better-off than her husband, who ends up dying of what is essentially a surfeit of bitterness from having lost most of his money and his children’s prospects. Better, perhaps, to be the sheep or the hen than the man who thinks only of the length of a sheep’s tail.²²

Yet Maggie’s mother also dislikes the resemblances to animals she sees in Maggie, and in fact anything that reminds her of Maggie not being a perfect replica of herself. She particularly dislikes Maggie’s hair, which Maggie plaits and cuts without her mother’s leave, and which “won’t curl all I can do with it” (*Mill* 5). This is the same hair that makes Maggie’s resemblance to a Skye terrier noticeable, one of the first animal metaphors that the narrator uses (as opposed to Mr. Tulliver’s metaphor in his dialogue of a long-tailed sheep); Mrs. Tulliver cannot see beyond this to acknowledge the noble traits that Ritvo’s Victorian public embraced in dogs, and which Maggie arguably has as well. Indeed, she cannot believe that she has given birth to a child not only unlike her and like a dog, but visually reminding

²² The resemblances of most characters in the book who are not Maggie to animals are analogous in part because they distance themselves from actual animals in the way that Maggie does not. The narrator thus uses analogies to show kinship since the living relationships with other beings are rarely present. Also, these characters tend to construct analogous relationships between animals and Maggie by themselves, as in dialogue, and use that to distance themselves from both; the layer of metaphors relating them in animals in narration is another, ironic way for the narrator to continue reinforcing the kinship they try to pass on to others.

Mrs. Tulliver of a mixed-race girl. Mrs. Tulliver complains how “I don’t like to fly I’ the face o’ Providence,” but she is still despairing that she has a daughter with “brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter” (*Mill* 4). Once again, the notion of Maggie as someone “mixed,” though this time in the sense of races rather than in the sense of Tulliver and Dodson inheritances, appears. Maggie’s interest in her fellow-creatures is echoed, at least in the narrow mind of her mother, by her resemblance to people of other nations, other places. Mrs. Tulliver reads Maggie’s skin along with her mind and hair as marking her foreign, not akin to the Dodsons *because* she is akin to something else. Even another woman, described with animal metaphors, is set against Maggie because of kinship with animals and other “inferiors.” It is little wonder that Maggie’s likeness to animals marks a separation from other human members of her family; when those other humans do not have economic motives or a conviction of gendered superiority to set themselves apart from Maggie, they still have the strange conviction that a “crossbreed” of two different families should resemble only one, in everything from hair to temperament, with hair largely standing *in* for temperament. Maggie’s ambiguity, of hair and intelligence and species and seemingly even human race, cannot be tolerated.

This depiction is all the more tragic as there is one person in the novel who, while displaying some signs of kinship to animals, largely escapes Maggie’s unhappiness, because she displays an acceptable kind of gendered kinship. Maggie’s cousin Lucy is compared to “a white kitten” (*Mill* 35) at the same time that Maggie is compared to a puppy, and later, after Tom says he wishes that Lucy was his sister and Maggie accidentally knocks over a pagoda he was building in her anger, Lucy watches them argue “mutely, like a kitten pausing from its lapping” (*Mill* 52). Lucy, then, has the animal kinship even as the narrator uses it to

express different connotations: delicacy, purity, and smallness, much more acceptable connotations for a young girl. Maggie is presented as small when being called a puppy or a Shetland pony, but she is also deliberately set up as large in contrast to Lucy, “taller by the head [than Lucy], though scarcely a year older” (*Mill* 35). Whereas Maggie, to her relatives, expresses roughness, a kind of brutishness or beastliness, Lucy inspires Tom, in particular, and even Maggie’s mother, who wishes that Lucy would have been her daughter, with admiration for her and the desire to protect her. She is the pet animal who needs to be sheltered and taken away from the world outside the walls, not a working dog or pony, and thus it appears that the people of St. Ogg’s *can* like animals and not mind if forced to acknowledge that a human is kin to an animal—as long as it is the right kind of animal. Dogs and horses, with their ambiguous, conflicting portrayals, apparently are not the right kind, but a kitten is.²³

Lucy also delights as an adolescent in making pets of animals that others see as vermin or, in the case of Tom and Mr. Tulliver, not at all. She is kind to her lapdog, Minny, who does live inside the house with her, and to her horse, Sinbad.

Sinbad was Lucy's chestnut horse, that she always fed with her own hand when he was turned out in the paddock. She was fond of feeding dependent creatures, and knew the private tastes of all the animals about the house, delighting in the little rippling sounds of her canaries when their beaks were busy with fresh seed, and in the small nibbling pleasures of certain animals which, lest she should appear too trivial, I will here call "the more familiar rodents" (*Mill* 222, quotation marks in original).

Horses and dogs, then, have a place in Lucy’s world. Even the narrator’s coyly named rodents do, and Lucy not only has a named dog (and a named horse, the only one in the

²³ It is important, however, that Lucy is a kitten and not a cat, in which case the comparison may have come across as rather different. Harriet Ritvo notes that cats often had a reputation as “bad creatures” among the Victorians because they were stubborn, much harder to breed attractively than dogs, and apt to go wild as well as prey on domestic or game animals (22). Once Lucy grows up, she is not compared to a cat in any way, and apparently impresses Tom more as simply an attractive human being.

book), but multiple pets whom she enjoys relating to. This is, again, probably because they are the right kinds of pets, either small and helpless or, in the case of the horse and the dog, not discussed at enough length to enter into the anxiety-causing portrayals that surround dogs and horses elsewhere in the novel.

At the same time, Lucy's kinship to animals gives her one quality no one else in the book has: she is also the only member of Maggie's family able to relate well to her, looking at her with admiration when they are young, and being able to become reconciled to Maggie even after she has apparently eloped with Lucy's fiancé and enchanted him into falling in love with her. Lucy survives the novel and reconciles with Stephen, and if Paul Yeoh is right that one purpose of Maggie's suffering is to better Lucy's life, then Maggie has done a good deed for the only other member of her family who acknowledges kinship with animals and is, perhaps, what Maggie could have been if she had had fairer features or more accepting parents. Lucy is, other than the childhood moments Maggie spends with animals and the sturdy defense Bob Jakin presents regarding dogs,²⁴ the only slender thread of sunlight for animal kinship in *The Mill on the Floss*.

Kinship to animals and acknowledging that kinship, then, does not predestine someone to unhappiness. The utter determination of others to ignore that kinship at best, to lament it or seek to dominate other animals at worst, causes that unhappiness. Maggie is far from flawless; she does seek to separate herself from other animals in some parts of the book, she is jealous of Lucy and obsessed with becoming an unproblematic little sister to Tom, and she is, in the opinions of some critics, too insistently presented as loveable. But she cannot help her hair, her intelligence, or her curiosity, and her delight in knowing about "one's

²⁴ It is notable that the only people Maggie rescues completely from the flood (since she drowns attempting to rescue Tom) are Bob Jakin and his family.

fellow-creatures” is presented as laudable in part because it means acknowledging a fact. It also elevates her above those who want only to turn inward and find smaller and ever smaller distinctions to separate themselves from the rest of the world, in their case consisting of human classes (not in reality, but because they deliberately blind themselves to reality). Maggie’s acknowledgment of kinship is tormented and expresses, in eloquent terms, both the cost of disrupting social norms by seeming too close to animals and the cost of never believing that that closeness exists.

The Light of Kinship: *Silas Marner*

George Eliot famously said that she started her historical novel *Romola* as a young woman and finished it as an old one. But along the way, she was interrupted by *Silas Marner*, a much simpler novel and one requiring less research and intellectual commitment, since it drew on the Midlands provincial life she already knew. Yet *Silas Marner* is unlike the equally Midlands-set *The Mill on the Floss* by being a tale of rejoining the world of animals, rather than a story of attempted (and ultimately futile) escape from a lonely and unforgiving world. It is similar, however, in that the lesson Silas must learn is one of kinship and connection, and to renew the bonds he has forsaken with living creatures, especially animals. In doing so, he must cast aside the false vision of kinship that he has to artificial objects, mostly money.

Near the end of the first part of the novel, as he walks the paths through his village with his adopted daughter Eppie, Silas watches her interact with animals. Eppie speaks to them, “mak[ing] remarks to the winged things that murmured happily above the bright petals,” and listens to them when they speak back; “she would turn her ear to some sudden bird-note.” And through them, Eppie speaks to Silas, “so that when [the bird-note] came, she

set up her small back and laughed with gurgling triumph” (Chapter XIV). Eppie’s *attention* to the birds, her willingness and desire to communicate, binds Silas, herself, and them into a three-sided triangle of kinship. Silas learns to pay attention to the birds because they interest Eppie, and that leads him into truly hearing their notes for the first time. Like Maggie, Eppie is attentive to animals as a child; unlike Maggie, she has a truly sympathetic parent who not only encourages her interest in other beings but learns from her himself. Although it does take time to reach this point—this is the sixteenth chapter—this scene shows one reason *Silas Marner* is a much more hopeful novel for animal kinship than *The Mill on the Floss*. Robert Dunham, arguing for the importance of echoes of Romantic childhood in the novel, notes, “As [Silas and Eppie] gather flowers, watch butterflies, and listen to bird-notes, Silas grows attentive to the world around him” (653). Dunham also notes that Silas grew up in the city, without a chance to enjoy the country animals. His regeneration is long in coming, but complete when it happens. Silas has to have a link to animals through another human being at first, but gradually “wakes up” to the importance of them himself.

Silas's regeneration takes so long to happen in part because he does not have even the concept of kinship to animals at first (the narrator does give him links to animals at times, but only in the narration, not in dialogue or by having Silas think of himself that way). He has no pets until after he adopts Eppie; he is a weaver, not a line of work that would bring him close to domestic animals like horses or cattle on a regular basis; nor does he walk outside and immerse himself in the sights of nature until after Eppie arrives. His inner world is shaped by objects in a more direct way than Maggie’s inner one is shaped by animals, indicating, perhaps, the simpler form of the fairy-tale genre that Eliot chose to work with for this novel as well as the more direct connection to animals that Silas has later. Starved of connection

after being thrown out of Lantern Yard, his religious community, and with his knowledge of herbs serving to separate him from rather than tie him to his neighbors, as they think him a sort of witch, Silas has nothing but his work and his guineas. The narrator describes his inner life in the following terms:

[Y]ear after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being. His life had reduced itself to the functions of weaving and hoarding, without any contemplation of an end towards which the functions tended. The same sort of process has perhaps been undergone by wiser men, when they have been cut off from faith and love—only, instead of a loom and a heap of guineas, they have had some erudite research, some ingenious project, or some well-knit theory. Strangely Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life, so that he produced the same sort of impression as a handle or a crooked tube, which has no meaning standing apart (Chapter II).

Once again, Eliot uses the word "narrow" to describe a literally cramped inner life, rather than the spacious metaphors that are characteristic of her idea-incarnations—Adam, Maggie, Dorothea—who have a more expansive mind, senses, and sympathy, and fit more easily into a wider Darwinian world. Silas is torn from the companionship that Lantern Yard provided him and that might have been his with the villagers, and chooses instead the company of money and objects. Though he is superficially more successful and contented than Maggie, his work cannot bring him true happiness because it consists of "desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being." In this sentence both "relation" and "being" hold importance. Eliot does not find in the isolated individual the poetry and rebellion that some artists of the Romantic movement did. Even her characters who are special because of inherent talents and common sense, such as Adam Bede, are not separated from the community because of it; one of the things that makes Adam a less flawed character than Dinah, his Methodist preacher wife, is that he relates better to animals and to the daily

realities of embodied lives and is able to lead Dinah back into communion with them, rather than retreating with her to a lofty height from which she contemplates the folly of humanity, or using obedience to the will of God as an artificial barrier. Silas is also isolated, if by different causes than isolate Dinah, and he must return to relationships, to kinship, before his inner life expands once more. This is the real gift that his adopted daughter Eppie offers him, first one being and then others to relate *to* and *through*.

The second redemptive aspect of Silas's relationship with her is that she is a being, rather than an object, like the guineas or the loom, and thus gets him out of the narrow circle that the narrator identifies in the passage quoted above. Here is one of Eliot's clearest instances in distinguishing between the kind of "kinship" that does not fulfill a human being's needs and what does. A water jug or a heap of money cannot make a human being fully human; one needs other living beings for that, because they alone have a complementary experience of evolved body, emotions, and mind. Despite the fairy-tale form of the novel, especially the replacement of Silas's stolen gold by the "magically" appearing Eppie, it is ultimately human decisions and human views that drive the outcome. If Silas had chosen to remain "narrow," mourning his lost gold or rejecting Eppie instead of accepting her as a gift, or if she had chosen to leave him when the wealthy Godfrey Cass informs her that he is her blood father, then the outcome would not have been redemptive. A happy ending, reconciliation, or redemption is not inevitable. Here, as is so often the case elsewhere in Eliot, what redemption exists comes through the actions of material, evolved beings.

The narrator acknowledges as much, talking about how "The same sort of process [narrowing] has perhaps been undergone by wiser men, when they have been cut off from faith and love—only, instead of a loom and a heap of guineas, they have had some erudite

research, some ingenious project, or some well-knit theory." The comment on "well-knit" looks back to Maggie and Tom and the "strongest fibers of their hearts" making it impossible for them to escape St. Ogg's. The scientific mindset is not enough by itself, even if one uses theory to understand one's surroundings. The expansiveness and the relation to other beings are necessary as well. Observations mean nothing without a larger theory to place them into, as Darwin said when complaining of the "isolated fact" that the theory of special creation addressed, but one must also know enough of other beings to understand the observations. Silas has, in Chapter II, none of those observations because he has utterly ceased to notice animals. He is like the people in St. Ogg's who fail to realize they are like ants or linked to the larger world.

Silas, then, is in need of redemption, since he can no longer make those observations or understand either theory or facts. Yet the author proves that he is not in fact irredeemable, so far sunk that his narrow inner life will not open up again. He has the ability to relate to others, though it is lavished on objects alone, and although the objects are the wrong destination for his emotions, they prove his emotions still exist. The guineas provide one example, his water jug another, since "[i]t ha[s] been his companion for twelve years." When it breaks, "Silas pick[s] up the pieces and carrie[s] them home with grief in his heart. The brown pot could never be of use to him any more, but he [sticks] the bits together and prop[s] the ruin in its old place for a memorial" (Chapter II). Here, Silas's capacity for thinking about something more than the mere collection of material objects, the guineas, shows itself. Rather than simply throwing a broken object away, he keeps that which "could never be of use to him any more," and sets up a private memorial rather like a grave. In the absence of human family to visit, in the absence of companion animals or noticing the natural world around

him, Silas creates relationships and establishes kinship with objects. These relationships are no substitutes for the ones that Eppie will introduce him to, but it does mean that he retains the faculty of kinship and the thirst for it. Circumstances, more than his own choice, have cut him out of the world, even as they have Maggie.

Eppie leads Silas back in two ways: as a means of causing his neighbors to take an interest in him and overcome their fear of his strangeness, and because she teaches him the animal world as she learns it. Dolly Winthrop, Silas's neighbor, adds a touch of her own reality to the fairy-like nature of Eppie's appearance by accepting it as part of the order of natural events: "it's like the night and the morning, and the sleeping and the waking, and the rain and the harvest—one goes and the other comes, and we know nothing how nor where" (Chapter XIV). Silas, long oblivious of the cycle of natural time that these events imply, can now rejoin the flow and live outside the artificial rhythms that his loom bound him to. Eventually, Eppie completes a cycle of her own by marrying Dolly's son and opening the possibility of more birth and growth.

However, Eppie also changes the fairy-tale like nature of the story even as she *is* the fairy-tale ending and reward. She, as it were, lifts Silas's curse of solitude and narrowness; she leads him in the direction of the outward motion that Darwin's imagination-powered reason opened to authors. "The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward, and carried them far away from their old eager pacing towards the same blank limit—carried them away to the new things that would come with the coming years" (Chapter XIV). The vast spread of evolution in both space and time, the passage of which is necessary to elaborate animals into different species and make the kinship of

animals with humans apparent, is echoed in the change that Eppie brings to Silas's life. The motion of his mind itself changes; the images in which his thoughts are organized transmute, from "pacing towards the same blank limit" to an outward, transported flourishing made by something greater than itself; he can think of the future as well as the present, and he will have a past to compare it to, as the passage compares the gold to Eppie. Because "Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires, seeking and loving sunshine, and living sounds, and living movements; making trial of everything, with trust in new joy, and stirring the human kindness in all eyes that looked on her" (Chapter XIV), she introduces Silas with those things she loves, making them, as well, the things *he* loves. Human kindness is not so far from human kinship, in either practicality or etymology. Emerging from his house into the sunshine, Silas also has far more chances of interacting with animals than he did when he remained inside most of the day, bound to his loom.

Likewise, Eppie interrupts the work that once consumed Silas. Silas's working life acquires the pauses that Eppie enforces, a more natural rhythm. Eppie "made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, even to the old winter-flies that came crawling forth in the early spring sunshine, and warming him into joy because *she* had joy" (Chapter XIV, emphasis in original). The kinship Eppie introduces Silas to, then, is not only with flowers and small birds, aspects of nature that are often accepted as conventionally sympathetic and pretty, but the weak, elderly, insectoid forms of life that traditionally call forth little sympathy from people living with them, even if they fascinated evolutionists such as Darwin. From becoming a cramped, spider-like figure earlier in the novel, Silas has grown into someone who can appreciate flies.

Although Eppie's connection with nature may be most powerful as a child and, "In fact, like many artists of her century when theological doctrine proved unable to bear the scrutiny of the times, [George Eliot] seems to rely upon the immediate experience of children as proof of the accessibility of true innocence" (Dunham 656), Eppie remains attentive to animals once she has become a teenager. The beginning of Chapter XVI sees her interacting with farm animals in a way that Maggie cannot, when she pets "a meek donkey, not scornfully critical of human trivialities, but thankful to share in them, if possible, by getting his nose scratched; and Eppie did not fail to gratify him with her usual notice, though it was attended with the inconvenience of his following them, painfully, up to the very door of their home." For Eppie, it is obviously no inconvenience at all compared to the joy of sharing. The donkey is frightened away by the bark of Silas and Eppie's dog when they arrive at the house, and their pets are described:

The sharp bark was the sign of an excited welcome that was awaiting them from a knowing brown terrier, who, after dancing at their legs in a hysterical manner, rushed with a worrying noise at a tortoise-shell kitten under the loom, and then rushed back with a sharp bark again, as much as to say, "I have done my duty by this feeble creature, you perceive"; while the lady-mother of the kitten sat sunning her white bosom in the window, and looked round with a sleepy air of expecting caresses, though she was not going to take any trouble for them (Chapter XVI).

In this passage are condensed a great many of the positive Victorian ideas of domestic animals as Danahay describes them: gentle, faithful, loyal, dutiful. Even the dog's possible implied violence in the "worrying noise" he utters at the kitten is tamed and made comfortable by its transformation into words, and the cat is characterized in terms almost completely opposite from the common negative Victorian stereotypes of cats. The stubbornness that Ritvo mentions is there in the cat's refusal to get up and come over to Silas and Eppie the way the dog does. But this cat, while retaining an air of independence in that

“she was not going to take any trouble” to get her expected caresses, is also a “lady” and enjoys being petted; she takes the proverbial stubbornness of the cat and makes it much more attractive while not eliminating it. Silas and Eppie’s home has become a loving environment for both humans and their pets. Silas and Eppie’s kindness and attention to, awareness of, animals—even with the donkey, Eppie becomes “aware that her behaviour was under observation” (Chapter XIV), and thus notices and meets the donkey’s gaze²⁵—has forged an ideal sort of kinship. They could not have this joy without being willing to acknowledge animals and deciding that they deserve to be treated kindly.

Eppie replaces the inanimate objects that Silas had lavished so much attention on earlier in the story, demanding his attention and instituting pauses in his work as well as being something more than the end goal of his work. Silas cares for Eppie and takes thought for what could affect her “as some man who has a precious plant to which he would give a nurturing home in a new soil, thinks of the rain, and the sunshine, and all influences, in relation to his nursling, and asks industriously for all knowledge that will help him to satisfy the wants of the searching roots, or to guard leaf and bud from invading harm” (Chapter XIV). Again, Eppie has a conduit to sunshine, and the “nurturing home in a new soil” that sustains her is Silas’s home as well. Silas has left the “cold narrow prison” and is growing like a plant himself into new awareness, new light; he “has learned, through a child’s loving insistence, to notice and to revere the living presences of the earth” (Dunham 659). By making him more like her but not identical, Eppie avoids the unity that is impossible with living people and the separation that Silas’s neighbors sought to maintain between him and

²⁵ Mark Payne, though it is in the context of a discussion of hunting stories and hunters returning the gaze of wild animals rather than domestic ones, notes the “strange bondage of the eyes” and how much it features as a part of animal-human interaction in narratives; returning an animal’s gaze, and having it returned, is a way of pointing the human’s attention beyond the normally accepted boundaries of imagination and fostering an empathy with another species (5).

them at first, achieving kinship-in-difference. *Silas Marner* is more than a fairy tale, more even than a complex pastoral; it provides, as *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* could not, a way for the separated human being to come home.

Conclusion

Eliot remained conflicted on the results of her experiments in incarnating her ideas; she felt that the writing of some novels, such as *Romola*, had aged her, and though she had abandoned Christianity, she studied Jewish culture, learned Hebrew, and showed the hero and title character of her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, returning to his religious heritage despite his Jewish mother's attempts to sever her and his ties with that culture. But what she does succeed in, brilliantly, is showing how her human characters' worlds are inseparable from the worlds of animals, how both animal metaphors and the characters' relationships with literal beings and beasts reflect those characters' attitudes to the physical world and, with it, the inescapable ties to the environments that produce them—the environment that enforces boundaries on them, whether they consciously acknowledge those boundaries unless forced to or not. But along with non-transcendence, there is joy. Whether the characters can always *achieve* that joy is more troubled; unlike the next writer I deal with, George Meredith, Eliot's narrators do not always lay out clear and reliable paths for acknowledging kinship with animals. It is possible, in fact, to see Maggie as being punished for trying to do so, and while her father and brother die during the course of the story, both her mother, who wishes Maggie wasn't so much like a dog or a pony, and the narrow, animal-ignorant society of St. Ogg's in general, live on. This makes it hard to assign poetic justice to their fates, or to suggest that thinking in a Darwinian manner is a positive value in itself, when there are so many people who don't do it, won't do it, and seem not to suffer for not doing it.

But, on the other hand, the existence of Lucy in *The Mill on the Floss* and Silas and Eppie in the last half of *Silas Marner* speak to the existence of human kinship with animals and the joy that *can* come with it, which is better, more fulfilling, than the lives that most citizens of St. Ogg's lead without it. The kinship is inevitable; the joy is not. Eliot's joy is contingent, reflecting here a resistance to the idea of natural selection, a sadness at the loss of religious faith and the "mystery" that made up its world, and a persuasion almost against her will that Darwin was right and these relationships did exist. This resistance is what makes Maggie's life so unsatisfactory for many readers, Silas's such a study in contrast to Maggie's, and the ending of *Middlemarch*, often acknowledged as her greatest work, less feminist than it could be, since Dorothea turns into the "drudging wife-scribe to a provincial pedant," in Catherine Gallagher's description of her final fate (68). But Dorothea's failure to lead her grand life and live up to the extravagant performance of her faith is not in and of itself an evil thing. In the slow process of giving up that faith, Dorothea comes to acknowledge her own kinship with other humans and animals, and gives up, as well, the longing for transcendence. That her life is not transcendent does not mean that is a failure; to see it as a failure may mean that we are looking through the wrong lenses, living in the wrong environment, desiring the wrong triumph, even as we are if we determine that the mere continued existence of divided life in St. Ogg's is the best fate possible. There is no great triumph, but there is life, and kinship, and forward motion.

Eliot was not Darwin, to make a scientific study of animals and write heavily researched nonfiction about the connections between them. But she made, in much the same way that he did, a study of humans and their kinship with the world around them, and she regretted, as he did, the loss of "mystery" that her investigations brought about, with the

same reluctance to restore that mystery to the world at the price of believing in a faith she had abandoned.

Chapter Four: Comic Unfaith: Meredith's Agnostic Joy of Kinship

Introduction

George Meredith, unlike Eliot and Darwin, did not spend so much time agonizing over the loss of his faith; he did spend time in a school in Neuweid, Germany, run by the Moravian Brethren, and admired some of their ideals, such as the separation of church and state (Stevenson *Ordeal* 12), but he did not pick up their religion. His later remarks on his agnosticism tended to be of the light, flippant kind. He claimed that “all love of the Apostles was belaboured out of me by three Sunday services of prodigious length and drowsiness,” and that his only true faith experience came “[w]hen I was quite a boy...[in] a spasm of religion which lasted about six weeks, during which I made myself a nuisance in asking everybody whether they were saved. But never since have I swallowed the Christian fable” (cit. on Stevenson *Ordeal* 11, 14). These remarks illustrate Meredith's more relaxed attitude, as opposed to Darwin and Eliot's tension, when engaging with the idea of religion. Without going so far as Robert Polhemus, who in his *Comic Faith* declares that “George Meredith is the first major British novelist explicitly to reject and ridicule the dogmas of Christianity and to set up comedy as a rival to religion” (204), I would say that Meredith's agnosticism is laced with joy by also being laced with his sense of humor. Several of his most comic characters are the ones who hold the most devout sense of faith; some of the ones most savaged by the ironies in his novels are those who presume to hold themselves above other animals, in a godly position. His novelistic worlds do not need a God of any kind, so the crime punished here is not blasphemy, but the aspiration itself to a post that should not be occupied.

Equally important to Meredith's comedy and working in partnership with his agnosticism is a Darwinian view of kinship with nature. Meredith represents other species as an inevitable part of the world that humans *must* attend to. For Meredith, we are composed of his "favorite trinity, given always in ascending order—blood, brain, spirit—[which] assumes the latent existence of animal joy, reason, and the capacity for aspiring to beauty and goodness" (Wright 7). Defined this way, Meredith's use of the word "spirit" does not mean that humans, as a species, have a soul or traditional spiritual capacity. Rather, like Swinburne, Meredith assumes that humans, animals, and even plants have the same destination and fate after life, a conviction perhaps displayed more openly in his poetry than his novels:

The pine-tree drops its dead;
They are quiet, as under the sea...
And we go,
And we drop like fruits of the tree,
Even we,
Even so. ("Dirge in Woods," l. 7-8, 12-15).

Meredith's capacity for portraying joy in this inevitable, inescapable kinship is partially hidden by the extraordinarily harsh and tragic punishments separatists receive in his novels, sometimes resulting in a conviction that Meredith is a tragic author. The Meredith critic Walter Wright regards him as comfortable in comedy, but "most original" in tragicomedy (v-vi). The ending of his first "serious" novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, results in the death of the title character's wife, Lucy, and the hero's ridiculous, useless duel against a man who did *not* succeed in seducing his wife. It seems particularly harsh because as late as Chapter 42 out of 45, Richard goes through encounters with other species (rabbits and other forest wildlife, while walking through a storm in the woods) that seem destined to bring him happily back to his wife's side, and it is only in the coincidence of stopping to pick up his

post that he receives the (outdated) information that his rival Lord Mountfalcon had attempted to seduce Lucy.²⁶ However, this conviction that the novel's ending is the "wrong" one ignores the fact that Richard continues to hold himself apart from other animals even after seeming to come back to an acceptance of his kinship with them; he lets his father's "System," a supposedly scientific set of ideals that stresses the separation of men from their biological drives so they will make "rational" choices," guide his final actions. The anonymous reviewer in the *Leader* a few weeks after the novel's publication, who complained, "Although it begins hopefully, it ends too disastrously. Through the mist of morbidity and gloom which pervades the commencement we seem to recognize 'a good time coming'; but when we come to the end we are unnecessarily and woefully disappointed" (Williams 62), did not take note of the fact that the good time *would* have come if not for Richard's own, deeply rooted separatism. Ultimately, Richard's revelation of kinship early on in *The Ordeal*, after one of his cousins explains to him "the fact that men were animals, and he an animal with the rest of them," and which he reacts to "in scorn" (76), makes less impact on him than his father's System. The critic Juliet Mitchell argues that "Richard is shocked to discover that in his kinship to the animals is supposed to lie the source of his nobleness" (91); he never gets over that shock enough to accept it, preferring to regard nobleness as coming from his father's ideas. Meredith's separatists must learn better not only once but many times, and hold on to the idea of kinship; they always stand the chance of losing it, so easy and potent is the temptation to hold oneself above other species.

This is one source of tension that does appear in Meredith's creativity, although he does incorporate Darwinian evolution into a joyful perspective. To be able to hold on to

²⁶ The coincidence is rendered all the more ridiculous by the fact that Richard had earlier come close to having an affair with Mountfalcon's wife, Bella, under the impression that he was "redeeming" a "fallen" woman—and that Bella is the one who warns him about her husband's designs.

considering their own resemblance to animals as joyful is the dangerous and difficult thing for even the protagonists of Meredith's novels and poems, who like to see themselves as above either the "bestial" part of themselves, other species in the world around them, or both. Meredith's biographer, Mervyn Jones, argues that "Meredith was alone in putting Darwinian knowledge to positive, creative use, and in evolving a philosophy that saved him both from a relapse into traditional religion and from a surrender to hopeless pessimism" (137-8). While I would contest Jones's perspective in one sense—Swinburne, Eliot, and Darwin himself also put this knowledge "to positive, creative use"—I would also acknowledge how creative Meredith's approach truly is. It *seems* veiled by failures like Richard's, but behind the apparent tragedy is the joy of those who manage to overcome separatism and regard themselves as akin, a joy even separatists like Richard know in fleeting moments. Meredith, appropriately, does not follow the Biblical narrative of an untroubled paradisaical knowledge of nature and then a fall from grace that can be reversed only by hard submission to a supernatural power. Instead, Meredith places all his main characters into a state of ignorance about their kinship with other species that requires multiple attempts to absorb the idea; some falter too deeply to permit recovery by the end of the text, some have attained the ideal, but the narrator implies that even the failures might recover (unless they are dead) and even the temporarily triumphant might fail. It is the end of the novel or poem only that brings about closure; the characters have the chance to continue living and changing. In this way, Meredith fits in well with Levine's contention in *Darwin and the Novelists* that Darwinian narratives are ultimately open and expanding, rather than transcendent, and with the contention that "The novel [in Meredith's view] is *about* change; its characters exist in order *to* change in a world of competing values, voices, and styles" (Stone "Bakhtin" 695,

emphasis in original). The joy of earth for Meredith lies in the chance to continue changing and reach the idea of kinship with other species; if one has not done it, one might still do it.

One of Meredith's beliefs was that "nature has no unkindness for us when we have comprehended [that Death and Life are one]. She attaches no more importance to the day's life than to the rise and fall of a wave. She presses to produce; our task is to hew and shape, lift, and leave behind us a race having more grip of the elements composing us. Thus at least the mind has an immortality" (cit. on Jones 136-7). *Understanding* is what alone can grant immortality, joy, or anything else in the world of a nature at once not unkind and not interested in human importance, and Darwin's evolutionary theory is one example of the "more grip of the elements composing us." Meredith demonstrates his grip of evolutionary theory in his extremely conscious and cerebral use of comedy, and the way that he makes it uncomfortable, channeling the discomfort felt by many Victorians when engaging with Darwinian theory. Meredith's comedy is uncomfortable because it is *inclusive* of both humans and animals. Meredith includes himself and the reader in his comedy as people who make mistakes,²⁷ who have imprecise and not well-regulated, earthy and burping and lustful bodies, who are all egoists. And thinking of ourselves as separate from other animals inevitably leads us to try and separate ourselves from other humans, as well as vice versa.

Meredith's egoists, in their (mostly male) own perspectives, are the only objective points-of-view standing outside the change and chaos of the evolutionary world; they are not only separatists, they are also transcendentalists. *They* have no beastly heritage or "animal" impulses that, in the words of Sir Willoughby Patterne, title character of Meredith's novel

²⁷ For example, Meredith based both *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and his "sonnet" sequence *Modern Love* on his own failed marriage and desertion by his wife, but the narrators in question do not adopt a sympathetic perspective towards the single father raising a son in the novel or the cheated-on husband in the poetry; instead, both have analytical ones that show the ways in which the men more than half responsible for their wives falling out of love with them.

The Egoist, draw other males into the competition for females which they win via “a handsomer tail than their fellows... a finer top-knot... a newer note... a longer stride,” and draw women into drifting helplessly after “the superlative male”—“She may be looking elsewhere, and you will see—the superlative will simply have to beckon, away she glides” (*Egoist* 36). Willoughby, meanwhile, only has to stand still, not join in the chase. *He* has not only better advantages than other men, they are more distinctively human than the list already given, which can also apply to birds; “[h]e had a style, a tone, an artist tailor, an authority of manner” (*Egoist* 37). He also gains Clara Middleton, his intended fiancée, by being above her wish for more time and freedom before she marries to travel and explore the world. “[R]esignedly languish,” he presents himself as willing to “obey her behests,” other than the fact that his mother wishes to see him married before she dies (*Egoist* 37). In his own eyes, Willoughby is serene, not dominating, even as he manages to “reduce the year [that Clara has asked for] to six months [before they marry],” and decides that Clara is going to be his caged animal: “She was implored to enter the state of captivity... Captive she must be” (*Egoist* 38). Meanwhile, he stigmatizes Clara’s other suitors as “the pack of rival pursuers [that] hung close behind, yelping and raising their dolorous throats to the moon” (*Egoist* 38). Willoughby contrasts his own humanity, calmness, and lack of motion to the animal nature, emotions, and frenetic action of both Clara and other men. He does not need to do those things, because he is above any connection to animals even in metaphor. They are for others. Even Willoughby’s intended wife is more of an animal than he is, because there is simply *no* comparison between this supreme egoist and others; he will marry her, but she is incapable of being elevated to his height.

This height is amplified by Willoughby into spiritual purity, exemplified by his calmness and his idea that he and Clara will shut out the world and live in a private temple for two, where she will worship him (*Egoist* 45). Irving Buchen, who explains his thesis in the title of his article, “The Egoists in *The Egoist*,” discusses the probable fate of those who try to distinguish themselves from other human beings by aspiring to a higher spiritual position.

But in stressing Willoughby’s terribly refined spirituality and his hatred of bestiality, Meredith rather seems to be suggesting that excessive worship of man’s spiritual side is itself a form of sensuality. Whenever an individual becomes too precious and exclusive in his devotion to man’s higher nature, he sets in motion a law of diminishing returns. Such devotion carried too far results in not just a coarsening of spirituality but in a degrading of it to the very bestial level the egoist disdains (259).

Reading this, it may seem as though simply not being like Willoughby is the way to escape this trap. However, there is no escape for *anyone* reading Meredith. There is a continuum, in that some characters, like Willoughby, may find themselves more devoted to extolling their spiritual virtues, more inclined to consider the comedy not about them, more determined to exile themselves from all “bestiality” and kinship to beasts, than others. But no one is exempt; none of Meredith’s characters enter his worlds perfect, only some with less to learn; and his comedy is not transcendent, but continuous and continuing. With no outside position to take up, the Muse of Comedy sits beside Meredith’s hero and heroine in *The Egoist*—Clara and Willoughby’s cousin Vernon Whitford, the man she has ultimately decided to marry—when they have united at the end, and spares them from her laughter for the moment, but “Sitting beside them the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly” (Chapter L). Clara in particular struggles during the book to acknowledge her kinship with animals; her temptation is not as severe as Willoughby’s, but she does follow the same course, for a while,

of trying to think of herself as pure and spiritually refined (in her case, through preservation of her virginity) and therefore not like the other animals around her who have less “noble” impulses. If Clara, or anyone else, falls back into thinking that they are separate, even when they have achieved some sense of their kinship with animals, they will be subjected to the same mockery that the narrator inflicts on Willoughby, what Virginia Woolf calls being “turned slowly round before a steady fire of scrutiny and criticism which allows no twitch on the victim’s part to escape it” (“Novels”). Luckily, holding this difficult and delicate idea in mind *is* possible, as Darwin also discusses; it simply takes work. Meredith’s poetry often contains more immediately successful examples of these thinkers than the novels do, partially because a poem’s compressed length gives less room for that “fire of scrutiny and criticism.” I begin, therefore, with a discussion of Meredith’s poetry, before moving on to characters in the novels who start out as separatists but then learn better, and finally going on to Meredith’s great separatists, including Willoughby, who hold themselves the furthest away from animals and are the targets of unflinching mockery.

Heaven on Earth: Meredith’s Poetry

Meredith’s poems offer a more concentrated kind of agnostic joy; as shorter lyrics, they do not usually show the journey of a character to acknowledging kinship, but offer such an epiphany to the reader. Among the most famous and longest of Meredith’s poems, “The Woods of Westermain,” shows the possibility of egoism and separatism lurking in the woods itself in the form of a “Dragon-fowl,” but also the path that the reader may take to find kinship with the other animals present in the setting. If one enters the wood with the right attitude, one will find relation and joy; if one enters with fear or antagonism, horror:

Nothing harms beneath the leaves
More than waves a swimmer cleaves....
Only at a dread of dark
Quaver, and they quit their form:
Thousand eyeballs under hoods
Have you by the hair (l. 3-4, 8-11).

It is the human “dread of dark” that changes Meredith’s “enchanted woods” into a place of horror or fear. Otherwise, the human listener/reader can “[t]oss your heart up with the lark,/ Foot at peace with mouse and worm,/ Fare you fair” (l. 5-7). The lark could be seen as a usual poetic symbol, hallowed by the tradition of the Romantics, among others, and thus less emblematic of true kinship than poetic power; John Holmes claims that in most truly Darwinian songbird poems, “In place of skylarks and nightingales, both of which are genuinely remarkable in their songs and behaviour, we are shown thrushes and wood warblers” (165), which are humbler, more common birds. On the other hand, Meredith follows the lark instantly with mice and worms, themselves exceedingly humble creatures, even symbolically negative ones in their common links with decay and death. The listeners can be as at peace with them as with the lark, with high-flying bird and creeping creatures, if they only avoid the trap of egoism.

The egoism is the “scaly Dragon-fowl,” crouching in the center of the wood, who can be “riven,” but not killed, because “slain/ Is no force in Westermain” (l. 218, 225-6). But he can be tamed and trained to perform a better service, the narrator insists; “Wait, and we shall forge him curbs,/ Put his fangs to use, tame,/ Teach him” (l. 227-29), the only animal in Westermain that the narrator encourages the reader to relate to in a way of dominance or mastery. Otherwise, even other reptiles in Westermain are to be respected and left alone, such as the snake that “across your path/ Stretches in his golden bath” (l. 12-13), non-threatening and described in admiring terms—another disruption of common symbolic

associations in the wake of mouse and worm. Meredith's creature in need of taming, then, is not simply a reflection of the serpent in the Bible. It is the metaphor for egoism, the mindset of the traveler that must needs be stamped and curbed down if he is to see the wood as it really is. Every other animal mentioned in the poem—squirrels, deer, yaffles (woodpeckers), night-jars—can remain free and “at peace” with humans, even if reflected in metaphorical, whimsical contexts, like the deer described as knights (l. 70), or entirely mythological, like the centaurs whose hoofbeats the narrator tells the listener he will hear if he ventures far enough into the wood (l. 116). Carol Bernstein argues that this is because Meredith's poetic worlds in poems like “The Woods of Westermain” are less geographically distinct than Wordsworth's. What motivates them is the human *relation*, the imaginative perception that is at once highly structured and motivated, and open to everyone. “Yet the experience is commonly available; indeed, the implication is that not to see it this way is to see it as a world without form” (147). Separatism blinds and darkens the wood, and presents a creature within it that does not exist even within a mythological context.²⁸

The Dragon-fowl, significantly, appears in the poem immediately after what Meredith calls “that snare,” the drive to think of one's own human species as unconnected to other animals, rare, uncommon, and elite:

From [Wisdom's] pasture 'mid the beasts
Rise to her ethereal feasts,
Not, though lightnings track your wit
Starward, scorning them you quit:
For be sure the bravest wing
Preens it in our common spring,
Thence along the vault to soar,

²⁸ While creatures do exist in mythology that are a combination of reptile and bird, such as the cockatrice, it is notable that Meredith, precise in his naming of specific creatures elsewhere in the poem, does not use such a word here, but rather the clumsy neologism “Dragon-fowl.” The clumsiness of the name is part of what marks the Dragon-fowl, differentiated from even ordinary human imagination that embraces and slides freely between ordinary animals and fantastic ones in this poem, as a force of separatism.

You with others, gathering more,
Glad of more, till you reject
Your proud title of elect,
Perilous even here while few
Roam the arched greenwood with you (l. 205-216).

Wisdom comes from the beasts, the very name for animals that Willoughby uses as a term of abuse in *The Egoist*; even while humankind pictures themselves soaring towards the stars, they are using wings that come from “our common spring,” the spring that includes both other animals (such as the birds that have implicitly lent their wings to Meredith’s metaphors) and humans who share the distinction of the same evolutionary heritage. The “proud title of elect” is ultimately “Perilous” and needs to be rejected, and with it, the distance from beasts and the fear of them that prompts the terror of the dark at the beginning of the poem. Meredith tells the reader at the beginning of the fourth section, the one containing both the Dragon-fowl and this admonishment to acknowledge kinship, “You must love the light so well/ That no darkness will seem fell” (l. 181-82). Both light and darkness are part of the cycle of day and night, and both are filled with animals; one pair are the “snake in his golden bath” and the “moth-winged [night]-jar” of lines 12-19, the absence of the bird’s full name calling the reader to fill in the gap and conjure darkness around the bird. Night-hunting animals and potentially venomous animals alike are still kin, not to be rejected or shoved away, as is easy to do if the traveler into the woods allows their own perceptions to matter more to them than the reality of that wood around them. The Dragon-fowl is the symbol of that possible snare, and what has to be curbed, tamed, and taught better is the readers’ own propensity to hold themselves above others, especially animals, and value “the proud title of elect” more than the bonds connecting them to those others.

Meredith takes one step further, and brings the evolutionary process itself into the woods as something that must be acknowledged. The “wit” mounting up from the beasts, which makes humans different from them without separating them, is a product of a world where change is the motivating force and most important process. Someone who “touch[es] the nerve of Change” also has “of Earth the clue” (l. 193-94). It is as close as Meredith can come to expressing a meaning of life, the mystery that replaces the mysteries of Christianity or organized religion. Change marks all animal life in the forest, which Meredith often pictures in motion, “trooping,” “tossing,” “footing,” and sameness is a purely stagnant force which humans favor when they wander too far from other beings. “Sameness locks no scurfy pond/ Here for Custom, crazy-fond:/ Change is on the wing to bud/ Rose in brain from rose in blood” (l. 197-200), chants the narrator. The “scurfy” pond, where the water grows still from the motionless green on top of it, is not “Here.” Rather, the Wood of Westermain is the home of the change that will bring the “Rose in brain,” the human intellect, on wings from the “blood” shared in common with other species. Meredith represents this knowledge as an answer anyone can reach and which can be noticed simply by acknowledging kinship with other beings, thus perhaps less satisfying than a true mystery religion, but also less excluding. Carol Bernstein describes the major theme of Meredith’s poetry as “change, as opposed to stasis or rigidity[; it] is a condition of life on earth with which man must cope; it also comes to characterize man’s condition. Organic change, or metamorphosis, is necessary so that the rhythms of human activity will merge with the greater rhythms of nature” (168). Animals have produced humans, but humans themselves will not stop changing, and cannot; they are not the pinnacle of a creation or an image of the Creator, but one part of an endless process. And because they are not the pinnacle of creation, they may be as fairly represented by other

animals, other cousins in the web of kinship, as well as by being always described as human. Meredith does this in the next two poems I will discuss, with a skylark in “The Lark Ascending” and with a variety of animals in “Love in the Valley.”

“The Lark Ascending,” like “The Woods of Westermain,” belongs to Meredith’s 1883 collection of poetry, *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth*, and is perhaps the best expression of that joy. Meredith’s narrator imitates the flowing and seemingly endless form of the lark’s song, and though of course the bird cannot sing the English words, Meredith includes lines that specifically surrender the human voice to the lark, admitting that the lark is a better singer of human passions and thoughts than the poet who watches him. “Was never voice of ours could say/ Our inmost in the sweetest way,/ Like yonder voice aloft, and link/ All hearers in the song they drink” (l. 85-88) skillfully combines the image of birdsong as water (used as well during “Love in the Valley”) with an apparent bird-speaking-for-humans despite the reality of human-speaking-for-bird. Meredith pushes to the edge of what his ideas and syntax, tortured as they often were but mattering less in this poem because of the form, can convey to those who are at one and at the same time listening to him and listening to the lark. A separation is both maintained between human and bird, and blurred. What comes out of this combination is the powerful kinship-in-difference that fulfills, on an artistic level, the kinship-in-difference that Darwin’s vision implies for human and animal species.

The narrator’s natural observation occurs mostly in the first two stanzas, and makes it plain that the skylark, while a creature of air, is bound to trees, water, and earth—in fact, specific kinds of trees, echoing the differentiated ones also found in “Love in the Valley.” His voice is “Such wooing as the ear receives/ From zephyr caught in choric leaves/ Of

aspens when their chattering net/ Is flushed to white with shivers wet” (l. 45-48). The aspens, too, have a voice, and it passes into the voice of the lark. The lark is the communicator for all, or at least the “millions,” both human and nonhuman, that the narrator imagines listening:

The song seraphically free
Of taint of personality,
So pure that it salutes the suns,
The voice of one for millions,
In whom the millions rejoice
For giving their one spirit voice (l. 93-98).

The “taint of personality” is important, because the lark does not conceive of himself as a private individual separated from the world above and below him and free to pursue his own destiny, with a voice that conveys only his ego and no other. In fact, says the narrator, the lark can *only* sing because he does not think this way. The adjective “seraphically” admits that this feat is difficult, more angelic than human, and that perhaps is the true reason that the lark must be the voice of the humans rather than the other way around. The lark has never separated himself from other species, as he is also the voice of “sheep and kine” (l. 71) along with “the dreams of labour in the town...The dance of children, thanks/ Of sowers” (l. 74, 77-78). Able to sing for both other animals and humans, he can show humans the way back to kinship out of separatism.

The faults of humans that prevent them from singing like the skylark are openly stated. Because “Our wisdom speaks from failing blood,/ Our passion is too full in flood,/ We want the key of his wild note,/ Of truthful in a tuneful throat” (l. 89-92). We crave too much, including the assertion of the “taint of personality” absent from the lark. Once again, we wish to place ourselves as individuals, as above the world or different from it or special or free of common bonds, more than we want to sing. It is not *impossible* for humans to appreciate the lark, since “The better heart of man shall see...as long/ As you crave nothing

save the song” (l. 82-84). But humans must want this, and to “hear the herb and tree” (l. 81), *more* than they want to speak of their own desire, express their individuality, or listen to their own voices over the lark. The proper attitude for the human speaker is humility and gratitude that the lark is there. In this case, an animal himself, not a human being closer to nature than the protagonist such as sometimes happens in the novels, guides the human listener back to the animal world.

Coming back to that realization of kinship is possible, but extremely difficult. However, it is a goal worth pursuing, since without the lark, humans lack not only kinship with other species, but also truth and joy. There is religious language in the poem which may seem to mute or distort this point. Besides the aforementioned use of “seraphically” in line 93, the lark also prompts humans to “feel celestially” (l. 83), and the lark sings “till his heaven fills” (l. 65). John Holmes sees the poem as reflecting a transcendent experience (174), which I disagree with; the speaker never actually transcends the lark’s song or escapes earth, but instead uses the song to reflect on human limitations and feel how kinship to the real, actual bird would benefit them. However, Holmes does say, “But the bird itself is never in doubt. It is a fellow creature. It lives in the pastoral, arable, partly wooded landscape that is its typical English habitat” (173). The actuality of the lark is much the strongest part of the poem, since the speaker returns to the bird again and again. He does not collapse himself into the lark, lose himself in blind union with it, or transcend the bird to become an angel, despite the suggestions in a few lines of the poem. If the lark sings “till his heaven fills,/ ‘T is love of earth that he instills” (l. 65-66). Meredith’s heavens are made of earth. Even when the lark’s voice begins to fade at the end of the poem, with the bird rising until the speaker can no longer hear it, his near-silence has the effect of “Extend[ing] the world at wings and dome,/

More spacious making more our home” (l. 119-120). This is no escape, no triumph of the human imagination using the lark as a stepping stone to a distant heaven. The lark widens the listener’s conception of earth and kinship, but makes the earth “more our home” at the same time. Meredith uses religious language in “The Lark Ascending” only to render his poem the more thoroughly agnostic.

“Love in the Valley” presents, likewise, an agnostic universe, though this time with a human male narrator who learns kinship from a human girl who already knows it. On the surface, it can be read as simply a love poem, describing the romance of the unnamed narrator and an equally nameless girl, a “wild thing” in the words of her mother, who dies at the end of the poem. The descriptions of cows and birds arguably cast the poem in the mode of a pastoral idyll. The poem was revised extensively after its first publication in 1851’s *Poems* (a book Meredith paid for himself, and which earned generally hostile reviews; “Love in the Valley” was the only poem more than one reviewer singled out for praise). The original has a more generous heaping of romantic sentiment, with lines such as “Powerless to speak all the ardour of my passion/ I catch her little hand as we listen to the lark” that are entirely gone from the revised version, but the romantic intent of the poem, one could argue, is not greatly changed despite the much closer relation to animals that the revised version suggests.

However, “Love in the Valley” sometimes places the animals *with* the beloved—not only in the sense of linking them to her or having them remind the narrator of her, though this also happens, but in the sense of presenting several long stanzas consisting of almost pure nature description, giving the animals of the valley equal space with the beloved. The title now takes on more significance. The place where this happens, and the relationships

created between the narrator, the “wild” girl, and the animals of the valley, are as important as the fact of the love affair itself. One of the best examples comes in the fifth stanza.

“Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping,” the narrator declares, “Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star./ Lone on the fir-branch, his rattle-note unvaried,/ Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown eve-jar” (l. 33-36). The “curves of the white owl” and the “rattle-note” of the eve-jar are not, apparently, connected to the narrator’s feelings toward the beloved. They are, however, descriptive of what happens in the valley at night, and show the narrator’s sympathetic willingness to observe, to see loveliness in animals as well as the girl he has so far been praising, and to describe the sounds those animals make accurately, even if, like the “rattle-note,” they are unlovely in themselves. “Love in the Valley” undoubtedly does refer to the narrator’s courtship of his beloved, but also expresses the narrator’s delight in simply being *in* the valley. Lines later in the poem like “Green-yellow bursts from the copse the laughing yaffle” (l. 117), “the blackbird’s mellow fluting notes” (l. 134), and “Doves of the fir-wood walling high our red roof/ Through the long noon coo, crooning through the coo” (l. 145-146) add more precise natural observation, in this case also of birds’ voices. All of these birds share the stanzas they appear in with the beloved, but in none is she the focus, and in all of them they appear before her; the yaffle is part of a meditation on “earth’s harvest” that ends with the narrator “look[ing] and think[ing] of mine” (l. 120), the blackbird “Calls my darling up with round and roguish challenge” (l. 135), and the doves help to indicate the weather that the beloved actually, specifically, does not appear in: “Nowhere is she seen” (l. 151). These details still remain worthy of observation and celebration even without the beloved’s presence. They also all exist independently of her, not reduced to metaphors, such as making her as sweet as a dove or singing like a blackbird.

Barbara Fass Leavy notes in her description of the narrator's unusual reluctance to simply "close" and consummate the relationship with his beloved, "Meredith's poetics reflect the dilemma of his lover, who cannot decide between flinging the net and keeping his beloved free so that he might in turn be free to imagine the glory of her "were she won!" (107)." The poem also indicates the extreme importance of the free-moving animals around her, free like the beloved who dances away from the narrator's nets. The narrator also does not "close" them into his bond with his lover and make of them only symbols, only important as introductions to her, or—what may be the most common case of all in love poetry—simply ignored or left undescribed. Meredith's allusiveness and common refusal of direct statement here reinforces the notion that humans are imbricated in nature and cannot escape it.

The poem's other stanzas that concentrate heavily on nature description would, if one attempted to read them purely as symbolic representations of a love affair, come out rather oddly. Images that may be interpreted as conventionally romantic, such as the doves, share the same stanza with "Cows [that] flap a slow tail knee-deep in the river,/ Breathless, given up to sun and gnat and fly" (l. 149-150). The cows are not part of a pastoral idyll, solidified as they are by the hard word "flap" and the details of gnats and flies, but sharply observed animals in their summer bathing. Even when the narrator turns to animals that are more directly connected and compared to the beloved, his observation remains sharp.

Shy as the squirrel and wayward as the swallow,
Swift as the swallow along the river's light
Circling the surface to meet his mirrored winglets,
Fleeter she seems in her stay than in her flight.
Shy as the squirrel that leaps among the pine-tops,
Wayward as the swallow overhead at set of sun (l. 9-14).

The detail of the swallow "Circling the surface to meet his mirrored winglets" preserves the kinship-in-difference; technically not an action possible for humans due to their lack of

wings, still, the speed and the swallow's implied delight in his reflections find their double reflection in the beloved's speed and waywardness. The squirrel, as well, though the animal with the less time spent on it in this stanza, provides both a comparison to the beloved and an actual existing animal for reflection, since the narrator elaborates more on the actions of the squirrel than on what the girl does. She does not leap among the pine-tops, but it is still, for the narrator, noteworthy that the squirrel does. The shyness binds the girl and squirrel as kin; the pine-top-leaping marks them as not identical. Like the lark that the girl is compared to later in the poem, "Hidden where the rose-flush drinks the rayless planet,/ Fountain-full he pours the spraying fountain showers" (l. 77-78), the squirrel is at once a metaphor and a real animal, at once there for the sake of the comparison to the human and existing for itself. It is through noticing the beloved that the lover comes to pay attention to them, so he is not speaking from a position of already attained wisdom like the narrator of "The Woods of Westermain," but he is finding out both of them at approximately the same time. And even stanzas where the beloved does not appear, as in the one with the doves and cows, he can spend time observing animals and noticing that they exist independently of humans in some parts of the poem even as they resemble them in others.

The narrator is also someone who must live within that linked world, unable to separate from it. In some cases his kinship is unwilling, as shown in the last stanza of the poem. The beloved has died, the cause of her death unspecified, and the narrator tries to find a place where he can mourn in private:

Could I find a place to be alone with heaven,

I would speak my heart out: heaven is my need.
Every woodland tree is flushing like the dog-wood,
Flushing like the whitebeam, swaying like the reed.
Flushing like the dog-wood crimson in October;

Streaming like the flag-reed South-West blown;
Flashing as in gusts the sudden-lighted white beam:
All seem to know what is for heaven alone (l. 201-208).

“Heaven is my need,” and yet the speaker can find no heaven higher than earth. The very Protestant image of a worshiper alone with his God is cut through and changed by the presence of trees and reeds, which, although they only “seem to know what is for heaven alone,” trouble the narrator enough that he cannot focus on his grief. A simple process for many, that of entering the inner space of their minds—especially when in the presence of such an overwhelming emotion as mourning for a lost love—and forgetting what lies around them until the emotion is eased becomes impossible for this narrator, because his eyes are connected to his mind. In the third line his “Every woodland tree” generalization may serve to blend the various plants together for a reader, indicating less of the sharp observation that he has wielded for most of the poem, but by the fifth line observation has reasserted itself, and the differences between plants are taken account of, difference within the whole demonstrated by “All” in the last line. Colors, movement, and a combination of colors and movement haunt the narrator and bind him into sympathy and kinship of knowledge with the natural world. This is typical of Meredith’s hard-edged poetics, blunter than in his novels. No escape is possible. One is part of nature—in this case, kinship with plants as well as with animals, so that the narrator’s attempt at separation actually broadens his metaphors—whether or not one wishes to be part of it, and the world goes on flushing, streaming, and flashing despite the death of one creature. This deliberate disruption of the pathetic fallacy is not new or unusual, but the way Meredith chooses to express it—particularly as this is the last stanza of the poem, offering the narrator no chance to find a more sympathetic place or bid a private farewell to his lover—shows his unusual *insistence* that it be so.

The speaker of “Love in the Valley,” then, tries to be a separatist but is dragged back into being in the world and explicitly denied a mystical, transcendent experience. Likewise, the choice of egoism is countered by the choice of kinship in “The Woods of Westermain,” and the narrator of “The Lark Ascending” warns that humans will be not only cut off from the natural world but cut off from virtues like truth if they do not listen to the lark. Kinship, and knowledge of kinship as Meredith defines it, *is* possible, only hard to hold in mind, and it is easy to fail along the road to it. Meredith, however, sets standards that accept nothing less as the ultimate reward for his heroes and heroines. Thus Clara and Diana, heroines of *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Crossways* respectively, who *could* have gone down the same road of separatism as ultimate separatists like Willoughby, the Countess de Saldar, and Fleetwood, find themselves acknowledging the natural world and giving up their fantasies.

An Education in Kinship: The Separatists Who Learn Better

None of Meredith’s characters enter into his texts perfect. In fact, he shows kinship as an idea important but so difficult to grasp that many of his most important and heroic characters attempt to become separatists of some kind at first. The only difference between them and characters like Willoughby and the other separatists I discuss in the next section of this chapter is that they do learn the lesson, and, at least as of the end of the text, have had more success than failure in relating to other species.

Close to *The Egoist* in its attempt by the main character at intellectual separation from the world of the flesh, but opposite in issue, is *Diana of the Crossways*, published in 1885, Meredith’s first truly successful novel.²⁹ Diana Merion is the beautiful daughter of an Irish

²⁹ Its success came from the fact that Meredith based the story on the scandal of Lady Caroline Norton, thought to have betrayed her husband by consorting with another man and then betraying a political secret later in life.

father and an English mother, “the flecked heroine of Reality: not always the same; not impeccable” (*Crossways* 335), who is pursued and courted by many men (including the one who will eventually wed her, Thomas Redworth) until she leaps into an inexplicable marriage with an English boor named Augustus Warwick. Warwick soon accuses Diana of committing adultery with an elderly politician, Lord Dannisburgh, and attempts to divorce her. The court finds that he has not sufficiently proved his accusation, so Diana stays married to Warwick in name but living apart from him. She spends most of the novel attempting to construct private sanctuaries for herself of one kind or another: at her country estate, the Crossways; in her London home where she hosts a variety of both men and women, most of whom talk politics; in a platonic love affair with the cold Percy Dacier, Lord Dannisburgh’s nephew; and at Copsley, the country estate where her best friend, an invalid named Emma Dunstane, lives. But her most potent course is to attempt to retreat into her own mind, to an image of herself as a spirit of pure intellect, without body, separate from others’ concerns. Being “not impeccable,” she tries to make herself so. She, too, takes Willoughby’s path, trying to reject all kinship with animals and the blood and body in order to rise above what she sees as animal passion. It takes Diana multiple mistakes and demonstrations of the impossibility of holding herself away from the “good gross Earth” (*Crossways* 335) for her to surrender and admit that she has a body. In the end, she fares better than Sir Willoughby because she can admit her mistake and grow close to other people, particularly Redworth, who teaches her love of nature.

It helps, perhaps, that while the dominant mode of *The Egoist* is comedy—in fact, “Comedy” is the first word of the novel, and the notoriously difficult “Prelude” is devoted to

The book sold well enough that Lady Norton’s relatives and friends objected, forcing Meredith to place a note at the beginning of further editions stating that *Diana* was entirely fictional.

glorifying Meredith's Comic Spirit—the prelude-like first chapter of *Diana* introduces a philosophical debate between realism and romance, and the necessity to reconcile them both to create Reality. Despite “Meredith's first chapters [being] notoriously difficult, often stylistically contorted...[*Diana's*] first chapter serves as a preface to the novel as a whole” (McGlamery 470). As the narrator shows Diana through the diarists who remember her scandal and quote her wit, he also points out that mingling realism and romance gives the human: “the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight” (*Crossways* 13). The word “fructifying” implies one of the lessons that Diana must learn, about her own sexuality and her incapability of joining in the frigid fantasy that her temporary lover Percy Dacier represents. To be human, continual growth is necessary (*Crossways* 15)—growth without a destined end or goal, the growth of evolution—and growth comes from “brainstuff.” Diana, then, does not need to give up her intelligence and concentrate only on flesh to be kin to animals. What she needs to do is unite blood, mind, and spirit in the Meredithian triad instead of trying to exalt mind above all else.

In part, Diana wishes to reject her body because her sexual experiences have been so disappointing. She ends up leaping into her failed marriage because of an unspecified distressing experience during Warwick's courtship and a sexual advance by her best friend's husband, Sir Lukin Dunstane. Prior to that, as Diana says in laughing self-deprecation to her friend Emma, “I'm a reptile! Pleasure here, pleasure there, I'm always thinking of pleasure. I shall give up thinking and take to drifting” (*Crossways* 40). The choice of “reptile” implicitly links Diana to lower, and possibly serpentine, creatures whose desires are base compared to a human's supposedly higher spirituality. However, at this point, Diana does not take the implication in a bad way, but lightly. She mocks those rich people who hang onto

their wealth until forced by the power of the lower classes to make a donation, and says, “And they are Christians. In name. Well, I thank heaven I’m at war with myself”

(*Crossways* 40). Set free from certainty, she has the advantage on those in-name-only Christians; she may be a reptile, but at least she knows the truth about herself.

Her first disappointment with men, not detailed, actually makes Diana fiercer in defense of her animality, another sign that she is not doomed to be an eternal separatist. She tells Emma, “I have discovered that I can be a tigress!” (*Crossways* 44). Yet it also inspires Diana to start thinking of ways to escape from marriage and the experience of having men touch her or come after her.

Her experience had wakened a sexual aversion, of some slight kind, enough to make her feminine pride stipulate for perfect independence, that she might have the calm out of which imagination spreads wing. Imagination had become her broader life, and on such an earth, under such skies, a husband who is not the fountain of it, certainly is a foreign animal: he is a discordant note. He contracts the ethereal world, deadens radiancy. He is gross fact, a leash, a muzzle, harness, a hood; whatever is detestable to the free limbs and senses (*Crossways* 45).

The husband becomes “gross,” the opposite of the “ethereal world” of the imagination in which Diana is now trying to locate herself. That the husband is a “foreign animal” also begins to oppose him to Diana, who is “free limbs and senses” that he will try to dominate. Although Diana is still vaguely linked to animals in that she has a “wing” in her imagination, she is now opting for seeing the imagined world from above. The husband is not mentioned as able to fly, and the “gross” in this passage goes back to the “good gross earth” of the first chapter. He is most likely, then, a land animal, literally beneath Diana as her imagination strikes out for the skies throughout the metaphor of this passage. Diana is mistaken in that she cannot simply fly away and leave the physical world behind; she is *not* an ethereal being, and while she resembles a bird, neither is she literally one. Here Diana simultaneously fails

the test of thinking herself akin to other beings—she is not, she is different and separate, not to be touched—and fails the test of difference. Changing herself at once into a metaphorical bird and a being without body, she will use the limitations of one form to combat the limitations on the other. It is one of her first fallings into the separatist trap.

Shortly after this, Sir Lukin makes his advance to her and changes her further, especially as Diana feels bound to conceal from her friend Emma, recipient of the above confessions, that it happened. Within this scene, the metaphors that so far have bound Diana to animals change. When reproaching Sir Lukin, “the tigress she had detected in her composition did not require to be called forth”; instead, “Those eyes of hers appeared as in a cloud, with the wrath above: she had the look of a Goddess in anger” (*Crossways* 47). Even when telling her friend that she has discovered she can fight like a tigress, Diana turns away from handling the next disappointing experience with a lustful man in the way a tigress would. Instead, she has firmly relocated herself to the cloudy, non-physical realm of her imagination, and she has made herself, with the idea of the Goddess, celestial. The Diana who once laughed at smug Christians for their certainty is retreating into the idea of herself as a heavenly figure, literally above the gross beings around her. And she becomes less and less like an animal as she does so.

Yet just because Diana has stopped thinking of herself in terms of animals does not mean that others have not done so. Although unaware of her husband’s attempted assault of Diana, Emma hears from him about the scandal in Diana’s marriage. This is one of the first introductions of what will become an increasingly important metaphor, that of Diana, usually the goddess of the hunt, chased by hounds. Emma “soon perceive[s] in Sir Lukin that the old Dog-world [is] preparing to yelp on a scent. He of his nature belong[s] to the hunting pack,

and with a cordial feeling for the quarry, he [is] quite with his world in expecting to see her run, and readiness to join the chase” (*Crossways* 63). While Diana could, arguably, be a human fugitive hunted by the hounds—animals that constrain freedom, and thus like the ones that Diana earlier compares possible husbands to—Emma is convinced, instead, that she is animal prey. ““You have seen the hunted hare,”” she tells Redworth, the man Diana eventually marries. ““It is our education—we have something of the hare in us when the hounds are [in] full cry. Our bravest, our best, have an impulse to run”” (*Crossways* 75). Redworth is instrumental in preventing two attempts by Diana to leave the country, once alone and once with her lover Percy Dacier, which would expose her to scandal. Both times he tracks her down and rescues her from the hunt, locating himself outside it. But he cannot do anything until Diana has begun to surrender the conviction that she is above ordinary actions—including suspicion, as Diana herself does not see any reason why her actions should involve her in scandal—and has begun to interest herself in Redworth’s knowledge of nature.

While Redworth sees Diana’s kinship with animals, Diana chooses Percy Dacier, the nephew of Lord Dannisburgh, a politician she is close to, as someone to dally with. Dacier encourages her separatist tendencies. The narrator’s references to Diana, as a pursued animal with a pounding heart, make the explicit point that as part of the hunt, she *is* an animal and she cannot fly from herself. But Dacier cannot envision Diana as anything alive, or, more important to the point, warm. The woman he will eventually marry, Constance Asper, is described as like a statue, and that is the reason for Dacier’s admiration of her; “he secretly admired a statuesque demeanour with a statue’s eyes” (*Crossways* 186). When attempting to account for his own draw to Diana, he entirely discounts, or thinks he is

discounting, the fact, acknowledged by other men, that Diana is beautiful; instead, “Such [the statue] was Dacier’s native taste; consequently the attractions of Diana Warwick for him were, he thought, chiefly mental, those of a Lady Egeria” (*Crossways* 186). Diana’s drive to separate herself from the world and retreat into the imagination or an imaginary heaven is complemented by Dacier’s focus on the mental aspects of Diana alone. Yet the “he thought” injected into Dacier’s musing above indicates that he might, like Diana, simply be mistaking the force of one kind of attraction (the mental) as a complete absence of the other (the physical). Dacier never intends to marry Diana because of the scandal attaching to her name (*Crossways* 186), yet he ultimately ends up attempting to flee the country with her, placing himself in a situation that will be assumed to be, at least by others, passionately physical, and from which his reputation can recover more easily than hers. This suggests that Dacier is deceiving himself as much as Diana is deceiving herself in the affair between them. Dacier is one of the separatists who does not learn better. Instead, he goes on to marry Constance, who is better-suited for him in several ways.³⁰

Diana remains under Dacier’s influence for a large portion of the novel, and, encouraged by him, she tries to wrap herself in a passionless, intellectual world that will keep her safe from the sexual contact that has not worked out well for her in the past. This pastoral is colder and less rich than even Willoughby’s visions of himself and his bride in a world of mirrors; Willoughby is aware of what he loathes, while Diana, for a time by sheer will alone, simply refuses to acknowledge it. Valuing the intellectual world would not necessarily be

³⁰ For example, Constance becomes more deeply involved in religion when she believes that Dacier has rejected her, to the point that her family fears she will become Catholic in her struggle to leave behind the world of the flesh and embrace the world of the spirit alone (*Crossways* 200). Diana, meanwhile, warns Dacier when he asks for her “Christian name,” “My Christian name! It is Pagan. In one sphere I am Hecate. Remember that” (*Crossways* 208). While Constance is the good Christian wife, with the potential to become a nun at one point rather than go out into the world, Diana is both the hunted, running hare and the goddess of witchcraft—far from the ideal that Dacier ends up adopting.

wrong; the narrator defends Diana as a “creature” of wit and intellect from the beginning of the book, and compares her to a hawk falling from above on her unsuspecting prey in conversation (*Crossways* 102). But her association with Dacier takes her so far into the mind that she begins to dislike even her own body. She tries to conceive of herself again as purely imaginative and her body is purely metaphorical. The narrator adds dryly at this point, “Especially are [metaphors] needed by the pedestalled woman in her conflict with the natural” (*Crossways* 232). Diana has undergone a combination of Dacier’s setting her up on a pedestal and deciding that she needs to be set there as well, in order to fulfill her ideal of herself. She is deeply distressed when she starts thinking that a spiritual ecstasy she has experienced might have its roots in something non-spiritual. If “the poetic ecstasy on her Salvatore heights had not been of origin divine, “ and “had sprung from other than spiritual founts? had sprung from the reddened sources she was compelled to conceal?”, then Diana finds “matter to clip her wings, quench her light, in the doubt” (*Crossways* 232). The “reddened sources she was compelled to conceal” are not defined for the reader, but red suggests blood, flowing through the body, usually the opposite of the “spiritual founts” and the “origin divine” that Diana wants to believe she has attained. Diana the mind-hawk still wishes only to possess the wings of the imagination that she thought of when she started to feel disgust towards the idea of a husband (*Crossways* 45). Even the reminder that she might not be divine, that she might be an ordinary creature struggling along on earth, has started to make her feel sick and weak. She comes close to turning into a separatist of the Willoughby type, unable to bear the touch of flesh or anything that is not purely “spiritual.” It takes other people, including her eventual husband Redworth, to guide Diana back to a proper view of herself, because they are in possession of knowledge about nature.

Although, as an investor in railways, he has a mind full of machines (*Crossways* 53), Redworth is also capable of appreciating natural beauty and has the natural history knowledge that was popular in early Victorian Britain. Like Darwin in his old age, Redworth's interest in practical knowledge, calculations, and investments, his conception of his own mind as a machine, has not destroyed his love of the organic. Diana does not see this view of him at first, when she is blinded by her disastrous marriage and then her love for Dacier. At a point in time when she has fled to the Crossways and is on the point of leaving England to make a new life in a foreign country, she has faith in Redworth's calculations, but perhaps in no other part of him (*Crossways* 92). Only toward the end of the novel does she discover "—and it set her first meditating whether she did know the man so very accurately—that he had printed, for private circulation, when at Harrow School, a little book, a record of his observations in nature" (*Crossways* 365), thus enrolling him in the ranks of natural history writers which also contained, when he published the *Journal of Researches* about the Beagle voyage, Darwin. Redworth is modest about it, casually accepting his relationship to animals as an observer rather than exaggerating it: "He shrugged at the nonsense of a boy's publishing; anybody's publishing he held for a doubtful proof of sanity. His excuse was, that he had not published opinions" (*Crossways* 365). Observations, then, are different than opinions, more objective, and also better worth giving to someone else to read.

Redworth is also able to impress Diana with his knowledge of birds. The narrator says that "He knew every bird by its flight and its pipe, habits, tricks, hints of sagacity homely with the original human; and his remarks on the sensitive life of trees and herbs were a spell to his thirsty hearers. Something of astronomy he knew; but in relation to that science,

he sank his voice, touchingly to Diana, who felt drawn to kinship with him when he had a pupil's tone" (*Crossways* 365-6). Knowledge of birds goes back to the "original human." Part of being human, then, *is* to know birds, and Diana is drawn at last from the intellectual heights she tried to haunt, symbolized by the wings of the imagination, to learning about mortal, literal birds from Redworth. Lest he seem too much above her, she also learns the limits of his knowledge. Tellingly, it is among the stars, high above the earth, that Redworth feels he knows the least. Diana's "kinship" with him comes where he is a pupil, and she returns to the literal earth she tried to abandon as well.

One of the last conversations Redworth and Diana have before they marry is about birds in hiding from the storm they are passing through. "'They [birds] profit ultimately by the deluge and the wreck,'" Redworth can say, secure in his certainty, because he holds the organic, evolutionary, long-term view that Meredith approved of, thinking of the future and the generations to come and discarding the fact that the storm may be a "bad time" for the "things of nature." He can welcome loose ends, as implied by his statement that "Nothing on earth," *of* earth, is "tucked-up." There is always an endless reaching on (*Crossways* 403). Meredith gives his most explicitly admirable character in *Crossways* the expanding, open imagination that Darwin's theory of natural selection encourages. Redworth is the one who sees that Diana is "a finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in good gross earth" (*Crossways* 353), and he is the one who helps Diana accept her own sexuality; when she returns to speak with her friend Emma Dunstane at the end of the novel, she is pregnant (*Crossways* 414). For Diana, who tried so hard to forget everything from "the reddened sources," this is the ultimate statement of the return to the body. She, like the birds that Redworth tells her about on the day of the storm, has accepted the temporary deluge and wreck of her attempts to

create a cold world for herself, and has passed through them, to ultimately profit. She who has been hawk, tigress, hunted hare, goddess, and attempted being of pure intellect, can now accept being a human who asks questions about the birds, and the stars, instead of attempting to soar beyond them.

Clara Middleton, the heroine of *The Egoist*, also begins as a flawed separatist, and must learn nearly the same lesson as Diana. Clara's mind, like Diana's, is full of high, cold places; she is repulsed by Willoughby's desire for her, and she thinks first of freedom and flight. For Clara, it is specifically virginity that she associates with freedom. "Before hearing of Constantia [Willoughby's first fiancée, who rejected him because of his egoism], she had mused upon liberty as a virgin Goddess—men were out of her thoughts; even the figure of a rescuer, if one dawned in her mind, was more angel than hero. That fair childish maidenliness had ceased" (*Egoist* 75). Clara, then, has lost her mental virginity with her mental innocence. But she tries to go on keeping it; she goes into raptures over a double-blossom white cherry tree, the "vestal of Civilization" (*Egoist* 76), which is sterile and must be bred by humans. Clara's perspective on the tree comments on its "load of virginal blossom" and the "wonder so divine, so unbounded" (*Egoist* 76) she experiences as she looks at it. She tries to hold onto this divine wonder, which is "like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space," but it is supplanted by "[h]appiness in the beauty of the tree," which is "more mortal and narrower," and "weigh[s] her to Earth" (*Egoist* 77). Clara thus has a desire for not just escape but transcendence, coming close to retreat into religious morality if not always practice. Her concept of chastity works as Christian, as well as pagan, and as neatly to separate her from the world; a vowed virgin may not be the *same* as the vestal virgin the tree is compared to, but neither of them participate in the world of change and kinship.

Yet while this is an entirely rational reaction to Willoughby's overweening possessiveness, Meredith will not permit such a thing when Clara's "freedom and flight" means Clara would also repulse the bounds of earth. Irving H. Buchen argues in his article "The Egoists in *The Egoist*" that every character in the novel falls under the egoist label, with Willoughby being only the most powerful representative. Clara cannot hang onto this mythological, and mythical, notion of eternal escape and transcendence from the flesh. While the idea of herself as virgin and the attempt to escape into a divine vision started by the cherry tree stands a chance of preserving Clara's mental freedom from Willoughby's tyranny, it does nothing for the freedom of her body, and in fact is damaging because it deems the mind Willoughby does not understand "pure" and the body that Willoughby wants to possess "corrupt." Buchen points out that, if Clara and Willoughby are both allowed to have their way and pursue their particular mental obsessions, "the civilized egoist [Willoughby] and the noble savage [Clara] would keep Society and Nature eternally apart" (262). Clara would separate herself both from other women who fall in love and have sex, and from other animals who are doing the same. In fact, one of the persistent images in the novel is that of a bird's nest full of eggs, which Crossjay, a young boy patronized by Willoughby, regularly finds and shows to Clara.

Crossjay, a cousin of Willoughby's whom Willoughby has essentially adopted, is in fact one of Clara's guides back to the world of kinship. Unlike Redworth, he does not grow up to marry the heroine of the novel, but his very youth—he is closer in age to Clara than Willoughby—means he can reach her as the man she eventually marries, Vernon Whitford, cannot. Crossjay knows all about hunting and fishing: "But the habits of birds, and the place for their eggs, and the management of rabbits, and the tickling of fish, and poaching joys

with combative boys of the district,” are all habits of his (*Egoist* 29). Although the metaphor of the heroine as something hunted is not as present or persistent in *The Egoist* as it is in *Diana of the Crossways*, when it does appear, Crossjay is the one who brings it to life. He sees Clara running across Willoughby’s grounds in an attempt to avoid conversation with him, and it turns both her and him into animals:

The sight of Miss Middleton running inflamed young Crossjay with the passion of the game of hare and hounds. He shouted a view-halloo, and flung up his legs. She was fleet; she ran as though a hundred little feet were bearing her onward smooth as water over the lawn and the sweeps of grass of the park, so swiftly did the hidden pair multiply one another to speed her...Suddenly her flight wound to an end in a dozen twittering steps, and she sank. Young Crossjay attained her, with just breath enough to say: "You are a runner!...And you don't pant a bit!" was his encomium.
"Dear me, no; not more than a bird. You might as well try to catch a bird"
(*Egoist* 67).

Clara’s attempt to shield her mind from Willoughby by casting herself into a divine or virginal mode is constantly disrupted by small moments like these, when Clara herself acknowledges how much she resembles a bird. And it is not only a bird she resembles; she seemingly has “a hundred little feet,” which brings to mind a possibly more unusual comparison, such as to a centipede. She is also a hare, and Crossjay is a hound. While most of the references in this passage are metaphorical, at the end Clara returns to a more literal kinship rooted in the body. A bird does not pant; neither does she pant. The ways they move and breathe, bodily actions, are similar.

These moments show that Clara is not, in fact, as determined a separatist as she herself assumes she is. The breath that passes through her lungs like a bird’s also fuels moments when she sings with that breath, “to herself above her darker-flowing thoughts, like the reed-warbler on the branch beside the night-stream; a simple song of a lighthearted sound, independent of the shifting black and grey of the flood underneath” (*Egoist* 70). This

is a simile, but again it begins in a bodily action. So does one of Clara's childhood memories that explains some of her fellow feeling for Crossjay. "She had been taken by playmate boys in her infancy to peep into hedge-leaves, where the mother-bird brooded on the nest; and the eyes of the bird in that marvellous dark thicket home, had sent her away with worlds of fancy" (*Egoist* 47). Meeting an animal's eyes is often a significant moment, both in reality and literature; John Berger, in his famous essay "Why Look at Animals?", describes the moment as one in which a human attains a recognition of the animal: "Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look" (5). The mother-bird on her nest may have indicated no recognition of Clara, but their shared gaze allows Clara to think of herself as both an observer and to become more introspective, to enter the "worlds of fancy," all inspired by a bird's eyes. Unlike the contemplation of the virginal tree later in the novel, in which Clara struggles to hold onto a "divine wonder" that slips away from her even as she thinks about it, this impression stays. Even if the emotion is sometimes uneasy, it is still "happy wondering" (*Egoist* 47). Clara has entered the territory of the emotion that Darwin often evokes in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* through his constant use of the word "wonderful." And it is looking into an animal's eyes that has made her feel this way.

Gaze also connects Clara with the man she eventually marries, Vernon Whitford. While he makes her uneasy—in comparison with the bird, "Mr. Whitford's gaze revive[s] her susceptibility, but not the old happy wondering" (*Egoist* 47)—she feels much more comfortable with him than with Willoughby. It is also significant that Vernon is asleep under the white cherry tree, and, on waking, he and Clara trade glances much as Clara and the bird did: "She looked down. Vernon was dreamily looking up" (*Egoist* 77). Although Clara

disappears so quickly that Vernon thinks of her as a possible hallucination, the connection of significant eye contact has been made. Clara has also come to the recognition of Vernon as a good man, and “That reflection vowed to endure. Poor by comparison with what it displaced [the feeling of transcendent escape as she gazed on the tree], it presented itself to her as conferring something on him, and she would not have had it absent though it robbed her” (*Egoist* 77). Both Clara’s impression of Vernon’s gaze and her impression of the bird’s gaze have staying power, and help to indicate, through Vernon meeting the eyes of a woman who has already met the eyes of a bird, that it also makes Vernon kin to the bird at one remove. Clara has likewise learned more about herself through gazing at both.

It is therefore clear that Clara’s clinging to a separatism from the world is impossible for her to maintain indefinitely; she is simply too much like an animal and too much akin to other animals. It becomes necessary that Clara find a mate, the way that Diana ultimately does in *Thomas Redworth*, and as other “mature” Meredith characters do. If “[i]n Meredith’s work the single life, whether ascetic or self-indulgent, is presented as incomplete and wasteful; self-sufficiency is an illusion, and mature people get married” (Muendel 128), then Clara must do the same if she is not to simply end as a wasteful separatist. Thus she ends up with Vernon Whitford, and her early connections with him and with Crossjay stand her in good stead and ultimately let her escape both the captivity Willoughby is trying to force on her and the prison she might have ended up in if left to herself.³¹ Clara and Vernon end the novel by walking together, much as Clara and Crossjay ran together in earlier scenes, and although *The Egoist* does not end with the heroine’s marriage and pregnancy as does *Diana*

³¹ For example, it is Crossjay who accidentally overhears Willoughby proposing to a different woman, Laetitia Dale, who has loved him for a long time but whom Willoughby previously refused to marry, and Crossjay’s telling of the news to Clara gives her a way to force Willoughby to let her go.

of *the Crossways*, it does show that Clara has been able to return the look from a man's eyes as she did from a bird's, and begin to think more about living and less about retreat.

The Fate of Separatists

While some of Meredith's characters are less inclined to reject their kinship with animals than others, the more determined ones end up as separatists not by luck, faith, or chance, but because they *fear* their kinship with other animals and what it says about them, so drive themselves further away. Willoughby Patterne, the "hero" of *The Egoist*, as noted by Buchen, thinks he will not be "refined" enough if he permits any thought of animal kinship to enter his brain; he wields science, among other weapons, against even thinking about the notion. The Countess de Saldar, of Meredith's novel *Evan Harrington*, is obsessed with hiding her lower-class origins (as a tailor's daughter) and while severing herself from her human family, disjoins herself as well from other species. Finally, Lord Fleetwood, the "hero" of Meredith's last novel, *The Amazing Marriage*, becomes obsessed with the spiritual "mystery" of his own personality and the distance he wishes to place between himself on the one hand and women and animals on the other, finally entering a Roman Catholic monastery when no other means of distance are enough for him. All these characters end up as figures of fun for the various narrators, and their sacrifices are not only peace of mind but the widened perspective that relationships with animals might have afforded them. Among other things, Willoughby and Fleetwood might have understood their flaws better if they had not so arrogantly cut themselves off from *all* other beings—other people are animals, they are not—and the Countess de Saldar might have been a less comic, more rounded person, since rejection of animals makes a large part of her ridiculousness.

The opening pages of *The Egoist*, Meredith's most famous novel, however, at first seem as if they have turned their back on an evolutionary or nature-oriented sensibility. The "malady of sameness, our modern malady," cannot be cured by Science; "Science introduced us to our o'er-hoary ancestry...whereupon we set up a primaeval chattering to rival the Amazon forest nigh nightfall, cured, we fancied. And before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail. We had it fore and aft. We were the same, and animals into the bargain. That is all we got from Science" (*Egoist* 2). This paragraph specifically spurns the Darwinian revelation of descent and kinship. There is also the fact that the main exemplar of science in the book, to a casual glance, is Sir Willoughby Patterne, one egoist of the novel's title, who turns to science to get over the shock of his first fiancée, Constantia Durham, eloping with another man, and often spends time in his lab when he wishes to get away from further trouble. "He had taken heartily to the pursuit of science, and spoke of little else. Science, he said, was in our days the sole object worth a devoted pursuit" (*Egoist* 22). As Willoughby is a generally selfish and shallow person, trying to turn the women he desires into "mirrors" that will do nothing but reflect him back to himself, neither the novel's language nor its surface characterization helps advance the cause of an evolutionary worldview. John Goode says with some reason that "The Prelude [of *The Egoist*] rejects the scientific description of human nature" (207).

However, much as Goode's sentence continues, "but to reject [the scientific explanation of human nature] is not to dismiss it," one can look at the relationship Willoughby actually achieves with nature, rather than the one he talks about or "practices" in experiments that are never described in detail. And here one sees Meredith doing something considerably more complex. Willoughby does consider himself in tune with nature, acting as

the natural male by seeking out the perfect and most fit mate—*The Egoist*, published in 1879, was considerably influenced by *The Descent of Man* and the theory of sexual selection—but he is not actually a practicing scientist; he is an amateur (Smith 56), with an amateur’s mistakes and misunderstanding of his field. Willoughby is using the language of sexual selection wrongly, but the novel does not really challenge the theory of selection itself (Smith 66), only the mistaken version that Willoughby is creating. The Darwinian view of nature endures in a way others can understand; whether or not Willoughby is right or wrong does not define *Darwin’s* correctness.

Willoughby also sees himself as having improved away from nature, to the point that he never need change again. “You know my detestation of changes,” Willoughby says to his devoted admirer, Laetitia Dale, who loves him but whose love Willoughby does not return (*Egoist* 34). These early words mark Willoughby as out of step with what his second fiancée, Clara Middleton, and his cousin Vernon Whitford, love, “the open, flux-dominated world” (Goode 229), wilder nature not under human control and changing continually. The voice that narrates the transformation of humans into animals by science at the beginning of the Prelude is essentially Willoughby’s, but among the changes he detests is the change of mind and perspective that the narrator performs with dazzling rapidity and frequency throughout the novel. Willoughby, who believes the “superlative” male rather helplessly attracts the female, and that this is a sign she will breed a good race (*Egoist* 36), who dislikes Laetitia in part because he thinks she is not robust enough to breed his children (*Egoist* 19), decides in the end that he must yield up Clara (by then desperate to escape him) because she is “a healthy creature, but an animal”; she will “drag men through the mud” (*Egoist* 390). Willoughby’s punishment is exquisite humiliation; already on the point of jilting Clara as he

was jilted, he is overheard by his young relative, Crossjay Patterne, imploring Laetitia to marry him instead. It is only by several awkward verbal contortions that Willoughby manages to give the impression that he is “nobly” letting Clara go and marrying Laetitia because she loves him, rather than Laetitia agreeing in the end because of Willoughby’s wealth; at that point, she has fallen out of love with him. And Willoughby does not convince Clara, Vernon, or the narrator, only a few of his relatives who are already prone to worship him. The narrator and his Comic Spirit laugh Willoughby out of the room.

What costs Willoughby three brides is his egoism, his desire to transform the rest of the world into a mirror of himself; it is the ultimate form of separation. He tells Clara, as the narrator’s free indirect style becomes a mirror of Willoughby’s consciousness, “Formally we thank [the world] for the good we get of it; only we two have an inner temple where the worship we conduct is actually, if you would but see it, an excommunication of the world. We abhor that beast to adore that divinity” (*Egoist* 47). All animals, and all other humans, become “that beast” which is to be shut out. Images of cages stud Willoughby’s speech, “affect[ing Clara] like a creature threatened with a deprivation of air” (*Egoist* 47). This is yet another sign that Clara, as discussed in the preceding section, does not belong with Willoughby; she is more animal than he is, and has a far greater need of freedom. Willoughby would agree with this, but he turns the terms “beast” and “animal” in ones of abuse.

There is nothing of sharing in these images, but a great deal of religion, showing that for Willoughby, religion and the science that he shuts himself up in his lab to pursue are not actually opposed. However, Willoughby has a warped understanding of religion in the same way he does of science; his “views of decorous behavior are a matter of the strictest religious

orthodoxy—and...he is his own self-appointed high priest” (Stevenson *Experimental* 101). It is not because religion and science are great systems of thought or even comforting to Willoughby that he values them, but because they both give him a way to impose separations between him and others. Tellingly, he pictures those who would court Clara if he dies and she becomes a widow as dogs, monkeys, and beasts:

‘And lose you, with the thought that you, lovely as you are, and the dogs of the world barking round you, might . . . Is it any wonder that I have my feeling for the world? This hand!—the thought is horrible. You would be surrounded; men are brutes; the scent of unfaithfulness excites them, overjoys them. And I helpless! The thought is maddening. I see a ring of monkeys grinning. There is your beauty, and man's delight in desecrating. You would be worried night and day to quit my name, to . . . I feel the blow now. You would have no rest for them, nothing to cling to without your oath [to be faithful to him after death as in life]’ (*Egoist* 49, ellipses in the original).

Beginning with the dogs, which might simply be the gossips that Willoughby also fears,³² this passage creates an increasing pattern of fearful animal imagery. Willoughby has already extolled himself for being the sort of “male” who can draw “females,” but other men interested in a beautiful women “are brutes,” who unlike Willoughby *scent* female sexual receptivity and unfaithfulness, here made into much the same thing. Somehow Willoughby is at one and the same time the perfect, fit animal type and different from these other animal types, caught (in this particular place in the passage) between dogs and monkeys, between four-legged creatures that rely mostly on scent and creatures whose likeness to humans was often seen as mockery; William Wood, an early animal classifier, referred to “the repugnance we feel to place the monkey at the head of the brute creation, and thus to associate him with man” (cit. on Ritvo 14). The “ring of monkeys grinning,” referred to by Willoughby the next time he speaks as “the ring of monkey faces grinning at me,” surrounds Willoughby,

³² The reason Willoughby ultimately relinquishes Clara and insists he really loves Laetitia is his fear of what society, particularly his neighbor Mrs. Mounstuart-Jenkins, will say if they learn that he was proposing to Laetitia while still being engaged to Clara, and/or that two other women have jilted him.

environs him, but does not touch him. *He* is not a monkey, he insists, despite the Prelude's complaint about Darwinian evolutionary knowledge transforming all humans into monkeys. He is somehow special—different. He uses kinship to lump in all *other* humans with animals, erasing all differences except his own undefined ones that prevent him from being an animal. When he tells Clara, “There is your beauty, and man's delight in desecrating,” and that she “would be worried night and day to quit my name,” he does not even seem to be thinking of himself as part of “man,” either the male animal or the inclusive name used for the human species as in Darwin's title *The Descent of Man*. He is the first-person subject; no other man has a name. *His* appreciation for female beauty is subtle and profound, religious; other men's appreciation is “desecrating.” Willoughby has exiled other humans from Eden as well as lumping everyone else in with animals.

Willoughby, then, cannot plead ignorance. He is fully alive to the idea that humans are akin to animals, but he uses it solely as a shield to protect *himself* from being tied in those bonds of kinship. His conviction of his own refinement, of his lacking the “bestial” part of humanity that he readily attributes to other human beings, leads to his egoism. And egoism is Meredith's name for willful separatism; as Polhemus defines it, “Egoism,” while granting a mind and personality to the egoist, “denies the separate being of others [as having minds of their own] and regards them as instruments or possessions for promoting self-esteem” (206). There is Willoughby, separate, perfect, alone, the only real human being in a world full of beasts, brutes, animals, and tools, and there is everyone else, under his control. That Willoughby threatens to cast off his cousin, Vernon Whitford, and other dependents if they displease him, and refers to such a fate as “extinction,” adding “He becomes to me at once as if he had never been” (*Egoist* 89), shows how he values himself in relation to other beings.

He is the only one who can *cause* other creatures to go extinct, and he revels in the power not only to do so, but to extend the extinction backwards in time, so that Vernon and anyone else who leaves Patterne Hall against his will ceases to exist in the past as well. Willoughby sees himself in control of all lives, all species, all religion, all time and space. He is a monster in the completely unnatural or supernatural sense of the term, Meredith's most complete egoist.

However, while he represents the farthest point on one side of Meredith's continuum, he is not unique or completely different from other characters. To make him so would go against Meredith's own philosophy of kinship, and in some ways gratify Willoughby's wishes to be separated. He is like some of Meredith's other separatists who have a tendency to imagine their own creator as a way to exalt themselves above both other species and humans; the "chosen" of the creator, or of Providence, is of course justified in their own actions and in feeling as though there exists an unbridgeable gap between themselves and others. "Providence" is the name given to the inscrutable cosmic powers by the Countess de Saldar, arguably Meredith's most comic character, in his second novel, *Evan Harrington*. The Countess, a tailor's daughter who has married a Portuguese count, has aristocratic pretensions and conceals her origins with dread, to the point that neither her husband nor her sisters' husbands know anything about them. Her greatest ambition is getting her brother Evan married to the rich Rose Jocelyn, and she will grasp at any illusion that indicates the world works in such a way that she can do this, particularly if she can please the mysterious Providence—despite the fact that this involves tricking herself much more than it does other characters. In Chapter 13, she considers for a moment whether those mysterious powers have turned their backs on her for trying to get Evan married, but rejects the idea as soon as she entertains it:

The Countess did feel that the heavens were hard on her. She resolved none the less to fight her way to her object; for where so much had conspired to favour her...could she believe the heavens in league against her? Did she not nightly pray to them, in all humbleness of body, for the safe issue of her cherished schemes? And in this, how unlike she was to the rest of mankind! She thought so; she relied on her devout observances; they gave her sweet confidence, and the sense of being specially shielded even when specially menaced.

The impression that she is alone in her devoutness, the irony of her prayer for “the safe issue of her cherished schemes” rather than for the safety of anyone she loves, and the oxymoron of seeing protection in a threat point out the hollowness of the Countess’s concept of God. She uses it to separate herself from others rather than to bind herself more closely to them. She prefers to rely on the capricious (and probably nonexistent) favor of “the heavens” rather than her brother’s sense of honor or Rose’s love for Evan, which the Countess does not think will survive the revelation that Evan is a tailor’s son. She even defrauds her own cleverness and determination; the syntax of the second sentence in the passage quoted above implies that her resolve to “fight her way to her object” would be nothing without the “conspiracy” in her favor. The Countess is a clever, capable woman tricked in the end by her own faith as much as by her refusal to acknowledge the ties of true kinship. It is appropriate that at the end of the novel she converts to Catholicism, a religion that Meredith portrayed as a particularly soul-destroying (because ascetic and world-denying) one. The Countess never learns the truth; at the end of the novel she writes a confident letter to her sister stating that the only “true gentlemen” are Catholics. Living in Rome, the center of the religion, surrounded by priests and cardinals, she can put both her human relatives and any sort of evolutionary kinship out of mind entirely. She retains the sole link to her sister only to brag to her and to get in a final jab at Evan and Rose, who have married: “I am not sure that,

spiritually, Rose is his most fitting helpmate” (Chapter XLVII) degrades the woman the Countess thought so highly of before due to her birth.

In fact, the Countess has so thoroughly changed her mind about Rose’s family that she insists one of Rose’s cousins, Lord Laxley, must be descended “from a pig!” (Chapter XLVII). What could have been a commonplace insult is given cutting force by the Countess’s dislike of *any* human kinship to animals. Earlier in the novel, while still convinced of the greatness of Rose’s family, she singles out her father’s pet monkey, Jacko, for condemnation, “point[ing] out her finger with mournful and impressive majesty, 'As we look down on that monkey, people of rank and consideration in society look on what poor dear Papa was'” (Chapter 9). The fact that the Countess’s “we” really means “I”—the rest of the family likes Jacko and is permitting him to sit at his dead master’s bedside—separates the Countess further from people, like her mother, who can acknowledge both her class origins and kinship to animals.³³ A moment later, “[g]rowing cognizant of the infamy of [Jacko’s] posture [cross-legged, which reminds her of tailors], the Countess begged Evan to drive him out of her sight, and took a sniff at her smelling-bottle” (Chapter 9). Mental separation is eventually not enough; the Countess cannot stand to be in the same room with an animal who not only reveals the lower-class origins of the family in his “attitude,” but also the origins of all humankind. Like Willoughby, the Countess associates the “beast” with “lowness,” although in her case the lowness is class-based rather than encompassing any other being that exists.

Evan Harrington was being serialized in *Once a Week* in the same year, 1860, that T. H. Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce were clashing at the British Association over whether

³³ In fact, in Chapter XXVI, when asked if she isn’t ashamed of being seen in a donkeycart, the Countess’s mother says briskly, “I’m ashamed of men, sometimes; never of animals.”

humans had primate ancestry. Meredith affirms in his descriptions of Jacko that the link between the family of humans and the family of monkeys is undeniable, and the only refuge for those who would deny the kinship is in the highly scented world of artificial pretenses. The Countess, already on stage for several chapters by this point, is accurately characterized as a snob, someone who is determined to ignore her blood heritage³⁴ and make herself and her family part of the aristocracy no matter what. She is the one who continues to try and arrange Evan's marriage with Rose Jocelyn long past the point where Evan has decided to confess his parentage to Rose. The Countess, despite being clever enough to do so, never achieves either the ideal of Meredith's characters, "freedom from shame about origins or personal inadequacies of class [and] family," or the more realistic "acceptance of personal limitations" that both Rose and Evan have achieved by the end of the book (Michta 41). Yearning after a mysterious God who will favor her above others, and disowning the ties of both blood and animal kinship, she is a perfect example of the kind of character Meredith mocked, and her entry into Catholicism at the end of the novel prefigures as well the fate of another kinship-denying character, Lord Fleetwood in *The Amazing Marriage*, whose intense separatism ultimately causes more harm than the Countess's antics.

Lord Fleetwood likes to proclaim himself a devotee of Nature, but it becomes quickly apparent, when he is in contact with actual animals, or even people who remind him of animals, that what he truly values are picturesque colors and other abstract ideas, seen from a distance. He first learns of Carinthia, the heroine and his eventual wife, from seeing her name written in a book by Gower Woodseer, a young man who has met Carinthia by chance.

³⁴ Meredith at times sought to deny his own lower-class family, so it was not that he had no sympathy for this position; but the Countess, in denying it through an animal, symbolically extends her rejection to the whole of several species.

I was puzzled by a name you write here and there near the end, and permit me to ask, it: Carinthia! It cannot be the country? You write after, the name: "A beautiful Gorgon—a haggard Venus." It seized me. I have had the face before my eyes ever since. You must mean a woman. I can't be deceived in allusions to a woman: they have heart in them. You met her somewhere about Carinthia, and gave her the name' (*Marriage* 48)?

Carinthia is the name also of the "Austrian province" where the heroine was born; she was named "by reason of her first seeing the light" there (*Marriage* 16). It is also the country both Woodseer and Fleetwood have come to tour, and Fleetwood loses his heart to Carinthia to the point of asking her to marry him the first time they dance together. But as is easily visible in the passage above, what Fleetwood values is the intense *symbolic* power of Carinthia's name. He assumes that it is not her real name, only one Woodseer has given her. This foreshadows the violent, mastering relationship that Fleetwood attempts to have with both Carinthia and animals, especially horses, in the novel to come. He loves them for what he imagines them to be, but when he grows close to them, he also grows faint and ill.

Despite almost reconciling with Carinthia in the middle of the novel, Fleetwood ultimately turns away from her, and his preference for the spiritual, the symbolic, and the abstract over the real and fleshly is the cause of it. When talking to Woodseer, a man who *does* recognize the kinship between human and animal, Fleetwood exclaims, "Such animals these women are! Good Lord!", and is roundly taken to task by Woodseer:

'You speak that of women and pretend to love Nature,' said Gower. 'You hate Nature unless you have it served on a dish by your own cook. That's the way to the madhouse or the monastery. There we expiate the sin of sins. A man finds the woman of all women fitted to stick him in the soil, and trim and point him to grow, and she's an animal for her pains' (*Marriage* 206).

Despite "the madhouse or the monastery" being offering as separate choices, Woodseer equalizes them by pointing out that hatred of Nature leads to both. Fleetwood's spirituality, his deep worship of the "mystery" at the heart of his own personality that makes him

rationalize his actions by saying there what he will do next is strange even to himself, is in the end nothing more than a justification for what he is already planning to do and what Woodseer predicts he *will* do. He takes vows and withdraws into a Catholic monastery at the urging of his spiritual adviser, Feltre. He ultimately finds himself under siege by the “Nature” he so pretended to love, and sees the monastery as a refuge from the natural world, animals, women, and other people, all at once. He contrasts Catholicism, the “refuge from women” and the “sole haven,” with Woodseer’s “Religion of Nature, with free admission for women,” and chooses the monastic system. This refuge keeps him safe from the “two sexes created to devour one another...what a world, where we have no safety except in renouncing it” (*Marriage* 251). Even humans, then, can participate in the spectacle of devouring one another, a word that places them squarely in the world of eating and survival that other species also inhabit. Fleetwood, of course, is utterly blind to the ironies of his own position, which implies, with the word “created,” a world that God had a hand in making—a God he also proposes to worship as the sole guarantee of safety from the horrors of animal kinship and conflict that God himself supposedly made. While Fleetwood’s egoism is not as extreme as Sir Willoughby Patterne’s, he is like him in that he pretends to want to be close to Nature, but turns away in horror when he finds out the natural world does not match his original conception of it. While the reader arguably grows more distant from Carinthia (who has less to learn about kinship) through the middle of the novel, because we do not share her viewpoint as often, “the actual events of the story oblige us to remember that Fleetwood is responsible for his own and Carinthia’s suffering” (Beer 170). Fleetwood’s wild striking out at animals of all kinds as responsible for “perverting” him distracts him from his own faults

and allows him to live without blaming himself, although his discomfort, as is common for Meredith's separatists, is still exquisite.

His enchantment with Carinthia lasts only while he can conceive her, not only as a seamless part of capital-N Nature, but as an artistic, symbolic figure. "Her face and bearing might really be taken to symbolize the forest life. She was as individual a representative as the Tragic and Comic masks, and should be got to stand between them for sign of the naturally straight-growing untrained, a noble daughter of the woods" (*Marriage* 75). The irony here, that the Tragic and Comic masks are in fact *not* individual faces but stylized ones, slips past Fleetwood. Judith Wilt argues that for Meredith, "Reality...is connection, the impingement of one being upon another, the flow of one man's feeling toward another for the sake of the other's response. Denial of this reality on anyone's part brings him destruction by chaining him firmly to abstraction" (8). Fleetwood's actual preference for abstractions, not simply his shying away from connection, marks out as a doubly-determined separatist, and doubly-doomed.

Later, when he and Carinthia have actually married and are traveling through England, Fleetwood rejects Carinthia entirely. "She belonged to the order of the variable animals—a woman indeed!—womanish enough in that" (*Marriage* 96). Like all of Meredith's major separatist characters, especially Willoughby, of whom he is a further development, Fleetwood ultimately cannot stand change, and opts for stasis. Here, not only is the "order of the variable animals" to be rejected along with Carinthia, but the change in Carinthia from "noble daughter of the woods" to living woman seated beside him—a living woman with a body and human needs, such as communication with him—is one he cannot bear. The abstraction is not only more attractive but paramount for him.

Fleetwood's disgust slides through comparisons of marriage to thoughts of men enchanted by witches, who behave like horses—"they snorted, whinnied, rolled, galloped" (*Marriage* 97)—to violence against actual horses, "lash[ing] his horses until Carinthia's low cry of entreaty rose to surprise" (*Marriage* 98). Carinthia pleads for him to let the horses alone, since "They go so willingly" and "I do not like the whip," but Fleetwood, although willing to grant the horses the tribute of "Good beasts, in their way," and defending himself with the notion that, "Ordinarily he was gentle with the beasts," continues to beat the horses (*Marriage* 98). His justification is that Carinthia is the one who has provoked him to use more violence than normal, and that he only uses the whip on the horses because he cannot on her; "He lashed at her in his heart for perverting the humanest of men" (*Marriage* 98). Yet his justifications fall short, considering the easy transference he makes not only from imagined animals to real ones, but from animals to Carinthia. In wishing to beat Carinthia, Fleetwood *does* wish to use his whip on an animal. Whether or not it is the one drawing the carriage at the moment becomes irrelevant.

Meredith's separatists end their respective texts as targets of mockery from the narrator if not always from the other characters; since these characters often have lessons to learn about kinship as well, they are not always in a position to mock. Meredith, however, in the words of Virginia Woolf quoted earlier, does invite the *reader* in to notice and laugh at the separatist's foibles—and hopefully take warning from them. As is clear with Diana and Clara, even the protagonist of a Meredith novel can go far in the direction of becoming a separatist and denying animal kinship. Robert Louis Stevenson, in his essay "Books Which Have Influenced Me," makes the point even more strongly, using the example of *The Egoist*: "A young friend of Mr. Meredith's (as I have the story) came to him in an agony. 'This is too

bad of you,' he cried. 'Willoughby is me!' 'No, my dear fellow,' said the author; 'he is all of us.'”

Conclusion

Meredith, while less uncomfortable with his agnosticism than Eliot and Darwin were, does persist in making that kinship hard to grasp for the reader. Stylistic idiosyncrasies, failed experiments, shifts in genre and tone in the middle of a novel (such as the melding between comedy and tragedy in *Richard Feverel*, still a preoccupation for modern critics), and the intense abstraction and intellectualization in even the novel acknowledged as his greatest, *The Egoist*, push readers away from the ideas Meredith considered important. Then, too, the ideas themselves may prove hard to swallow for readers even if they are sympathetic to Meredith’s aims. When Oscar Wilde stated in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” “One incomparable novelist we have now in England, Mr. George Meredith...to him belongs philosophy in fiction. His people not merely live, but they live in thought,” it is to make the point that Meredith is *anti*-popular, and has never cared for what will win him praise and admiration from the crowd of readers.³⁵ Meredith can come across as an elitist, and the chance to view the “twitches” of the characters he subjects to such intense scrutiny can make the reader uncomfortable as easily as they might make him or her laugh.

Nevertheless, as I have tried to show in this chapter, Meredith’s ideas are worth grasping. He does not retreat, intellectually or spiritually, into a cloister hidden from the world. He engages instead with the ideas of body, mind, and spirit as all descended from animals, and explores the implications of what comes from these ideas. Agnostic in a world

³⁵ Meredith did, in fact, crave popular success when he first began writing; hence his experimentation with different kinds of fiction—fantasy, comedy, the “plain tale” of his novel *Rhoda Fleming*—in an attempt to earn money and reputation. But Wilde was writing in 1891, the year Meredith published *One of Our Conquerors* (the language of which is famously difficult) and had begun to make statements that he deliberately wanted to baffle his critics.

where his own doubt seems not to have troubled him to the extent that it did Darwin and Eliot, nor been important to him in the way that it was to Swinburne, he instead demonstrates the inevitable consequences of failure to properly acknowledge the claims of our kinship-in-difference—the ways in which we are akin to animals but not the same. For him, humans and animals are joined as parts of the same world, both literally and figuratively, and escape from either is not possible. No transcendent God waits to rescue us, whether from our own mistakes or the urges and sexual passions that we must come to terms with, our inheritance from our animal relatives; to Meredith this was not a divine revelation but part of reality. If his novels and particularly his poems insist on making the point with a special sharpness, it is more because of the inevitable tendency of human beings to, as he puts it in *The Essay on Comedy*, “wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate,” rather than face that reality with their eyes open, than because animal kinship is an especially surprising point. All humans are, for Meredith, self-deceivers, including himself, as one can see from his treatment of narrators who were close to him in various ways; when Meredith says that we cannot deny “our kinship [with the egoist] except by lying or obtuseness” (Polhemus 208), he is talking about himself as well. All of Meredith’s characters struggle to achieve an education in reconciling with their animal community. That some fail and some succeed is not *only* comedy, tragedy, or authorial plotting; that is also life.

Chapter Five: “We Too Shall Surely Pass Out of the Sun”: Swinburne, Anti-Theism, and the Kinship of Mortality

Introduction

Algernon Charles Swinburne is the most anti-theistic of the writers I deal with. He was committed from his college days not simply to expressing a world charged with the tension of the Darwinian transition, as was Eliot, or to showing the fate of human separatists who tried to distance themselves from animals, as was Meredith, or to proposing scientific observations against special creation supported with wonder, awe, and continual investigation, as was Darwin. Instead, Swinburne openly attacked and mocked Christianity, most famously in his 1866 volume of poetry, *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, but also in lighter verse not published during his lifetime; the “Cannibal Catechism,” written for the atheistic Cannibal Club to which Swinburne belonged, appeals to the Deity, supposedly a “Lord of love,” in lines 29-30 to “confound & damn them [sinners],/ Damn & confound them!”

However, despite his somewhat childish urge to *épater le bourgeois*, Swinburne is also the one of the writers I deal with, I would argue, who establishes the most profound non-religious kinship between animals and humankind. His voluminous verse creates numerous and strikingly different variations of this relationship, often revolving around death, sorrow, and suffering, but equally as often finding joy or at least satisfaction in the existence of these basic realities—in the fact that humans are not separated from animals by the survival of the soul beyond death, but that humans must create their own immortality, if they wish it, in the form of art or devotion to the political liberty of their species, and otherwise have oblivion.³⁶

³⁶ It is, in fact, his addresses to oblivion itself that often seem most joyous and his artistic immortality most fragile, as in the lines from *Tristram of Lyonesse* that I take my chapter title from: “All gifts but one the jealous

The Christian God, as well as other deities in some of Swinburne's poetry, is incapable of being a part of this relationship because he does not die or change; he must be done away with. However, a god (or, more often in the poetry, goddess) who is mutable and mortal will be accepted with love. Stripped of the attributes that would make them more traditional deities, they enter into kinship because they can now change and die, the important traits of species in Swinburne's world. And they enter, too, into happiness. Only those who can die can rejoice.

Swinburne's writing creates visions of a cyclic, constantly changing, evolutionary world in which the humans who achieve true joy are those who give themselves over to reality without pause or complaint, in a complicated submissive relationship that accepts and acknowledges the physical power of pain, death, and time over human beings rather than attempting to conquer it. There is no escape, as there is no permanent separation, from physical nature. If "transcendence" is to be achieved, it will come through this submission, as humans are swept up and absorbed by something larger than themselves. But this is not simply a surrender to union or oneness, which does not exist in Swinburne's highly individualized poetic worlds. It is an *argued* submission rather than an instinctive or unthinking one; hence, Swinburne's frequent defenses of death and the lack of an afterlife.

The argument springs from Swinburne's deconversion from Christianity, at once the best documented of the deconversions of the authors in this book and a mystery. As Margot K. Louis discusses in *Swinburne and His Gods*, Swinburne was raised High Church Anglican, and it is perhaps better to look at his letters for biographical details of the deconversion than to assume one can find its source looking through his poetry (9). Cecil Y.

God may keep/ From our soul's longing, one he cannot—sleep... We, as the men whose name on earth is none,/We too shall surely pass out of the sun" (I. 203-04, 209-10).

Lang, editor of the *Letters*, says in his introduction to them, “Like many others, Swinburne cast off his theology in college. For the remainder of his life his antitheism was absolute, and from this particular point of view his letters show no development, no retreat, no wavering...As an antitheist he was perfectly consistent” (xxiii-xxiv). However, Lang does not deny Swinburne’s piety in childhood: “As his letters show, in 1854 and 1855 he was as orthodox as the most doting mother, the most exigent father, would have wished” (xxiii). Swinburne’s experience at Oxford is evidently responsible, and it is not unreasonable, given its tenets, to suppose that his joining the Old Mortality Society there played some part in his deconversion. One of those tenets, according to the “History” of the Society, was that the ““Society took mortality for its style” because “mortality hath the seeds and peradventure even the form of Immortality³⁷” (cit. in Monsman, footnote 5, p .361). Swinburne arguably grew obsessed with mortality, especially in his earlier poetry. He also was likely to have taken further than some others the society’s emphasis on reason, its dedication to “the ultimate validity of human reason in things secular and sacred” (Monsman 366). Swinburne applies this reason remorselessly to Christianity, exposing its contradictions and the fear of mortality that, for him, resides below its emphasis on immortality of the soul. By at least 1863, Swinburne was part of the Cannibal Club, “a group of serious antitheists, though its members clearly spent many of their cannibalizing hours in irreverent mockery of religious subjects” (McGann 269), for which “The Cannibal Catechism” was written. And Swinburne shared with George Eliot the advantage of a complex religious upbringing and intense childhood and adolescent faith that led him to read extensively in the Bible before he broke

³⁷ Swinburne’s many references to destruction of immortality, however, show that he did not mold himself solely on the Mortality Society’s creed.

with Christian tradition. For the rest of his life, Swinburne would expertly employ Biblical language and allusion in mockery and undermining of that tradition.

At the same time, Swinburne maintained a capacity for adoration and submission probably linked to that childhood and adolescent faith. He needed, however, for his gods to be mortal and visible; not for him the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. He wrote to a friend, “I am not sure that any other emotion is so durable and so persistently delicious as that of worship, when your god is indubitable and incarnate before your eyes” (cit. on Rooksby *Life* 92). He thus worshipped many of his favorite writers: Walter Savage Landor, Victor Hugo, William Blake, and most especially Sappho. His poem “Anactoria” makes Sappho into an antitheist heroine who hates God for his lack of kinship with his own created species, and “On the Cliffs” literally makes Sappho into a goddess. She is, however, only a goddess because she was first born into a body that died and has been transformed into a mortal bird, the nightingale: “O soul triune, woman and god and bird” (l. 351). Thus she remains mortal and mutable, and her second rebirth makes her akin to animals as well as human beings—and, perhaps even more pertinent given the discussion later in this chapter, birds specifically. Swinburne’s poetry does not allow his gods to escape too closely the way of all flesh.

The gods Swinburne’s poetry hates and names “the supreme evil” (*Atalanta in Calydon* l. 1151) are those who are both immutable and immortal. The gods have inflicted pain on humans, and that is to be expected, because pain is part of the normal cycle of life, and necessary for the transformations that Swinburne uses to such grand effect when mixing Sappho, Apollo, and Philomela. What is morally wrong is the refusal of the gods to share in that suffering—or, in fact, in the creative activity that they have filled humans with such a

need to accomplish. If they will not die and they will not create, they cannot love; they are exiled from even artistic kinship.³⁸ After an impressive catalogue of crimes that the gods commit, including being immortal when humans are mortal and “cruel” while “men are piteous,” the Chorus in *Atalanta in Calydon* concludes that the only rational response is to be “against thee, against thee,/ O God most high” (1182-1192). The speakers in the Chorus can at least witness the cruelty of the world and deny their love to God, keeping it for themselves and the world of mortal things, even as they give their (forced, in this case, unchosen) submission.

“To be born for death, to suffer limitation, to know that neither this nor any other age will consummate human experience: these ideas, for Swinburne, represent what it means to be free, even, in a sense, to be God” (McGann 239). One can thus be free, but not transcendent—free from the fear of death that could limit one’s actions, not free from death itself. Swinburne’s gods, at least in poems where they can be assumed to exist to their speakers, are kin to humans in much the same way as animals are kin to humans along the evolutionary spectrum, the differences ones of degree and not kind. Swinburne’s created universes tend to thrive off such paradoxes, such paired contraries. As another of those contraries, it is thus wrong to speak of a progression from one idea of deity in Swinburne’s poetry to another; Swinburne’s evolutionary view of the world does not hold progression, only change, and in that way is highly Darwinian. George Levine notes that the naturalists of Darwin’s era

³⁸ This is another, subtler way in which Swinburne undermines the idea of a Christian Creator; he gives the credit for works of art to those who can change and die, leaving the Christian God sterile. In much the same way, Darwin takes apart the idea of a Maker/Creator associated with natural theology and sets the world free from the necessity of embodying a superhuman (thus incomprehensible) ideal of artistic perfection. When Swinburne does engage with the idea of a god’s creativity, as in “Hertha,” discussed below, he can envision only a god who is in and of the order of nature, and thus *gives birth* rather than *making*.

s[aw] that change was continuing and ineluctable, but they had been convinced by Darwin that change was a condition for life itself. The ideal stability and stasis of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy becomes, for the naturalists, a disastrous myth...But the distinction between change and progress is critical. While Darwin was adapted to the progressive idea, and much of his writing justifies that adaptation, his theory itself argues not for progress, but for change (Levine 252-53).

Although Swinburne was not a naturalist and Levine's argument does not mention him specifically, Swinburne would often pick up ideas and images used in his earlier poetry, transform them, and carry them forward into new contexts. And yet, the deities in the poems *do* change, because this is permitted. In one phase, that of the "virulent loathing" of his youth, Swinburne mocked Christianity with demonic parodies and praised exclusively the kinship of mortality that linked humans and animals, leaving the (immortal) gods outside; in the still more virulent loathing of his later years, he produced landscape poetry that made beauty of barrenness and tended to dissolve even his changeful deities into the cycles of the world itself. This is Swinburne at his most Darwinian, accepting what mortality offers and struggling to create human art that will encompass it and cope with it, just as Darwin's theories are an attempt to take heed of the suffering of eaten animals and extinct species in nature and reshape the human imagination to fit a reasonable conception of other creatures rather than persisting in the delusion of a perfect, Designed world. Swinburne's worlds are arguably cruel, but no crueler to humans than they are to other animals—a perspective that takes some readjustment, and abandoning of yet another concept based on the separation of humans and animals, on the reader's part.

Swinburne's poetry also takes another slightly unusual direction in most often handling not primates, the animals closest in classification to human beings, or the domestic animals such as dogs that we may more easily accept as kin because we are around them

constantly, but birds. To Swinburne, the bird, and especially the sea-mew or sea-gull, was the constant companion in metaphor and reality for his highest heroes and heroines, Sappho, Iseult, and Tristram. Sappho is more often compared to a nightingale, Tristram to the gull, but a bird's use of wings, ability to fly and/or plunge into the sea (the sea was one of Swinburne's great loves), and songs and other noises elevated it to the height of joy, and compared favorably and directly with human freedom, nearness to natural elements, and songs. I begin with Sappho as the nightingale, move on to birds that link two Swinburnean "mother goddesses" to the death of the afterlife, and then conclude with a reading of the birds in the later *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

The Nightingale: Sappho

While acknowledging that Swinburne's ideas form no distinct progression or teleology, one may still notice the differences among Swinburne's books. Some are stronger expressions of certain ideas, certain relationships among animals, humanity, and the concept of deity, than others. *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, Swinburne's first volume of collected poems rather than poetic drama, is his deepest exploration of the community of mortality between humans and animals, leaving God on the outside, and of its obverse, the denial of the Resurrection and an afterlife. It also touches on the kinship of pain that binds the created, which for Swinburne includes the relationships of sadism and masochism. Even in superficially pagan contexts, the poems often obtrude a Christian note, mostly to show the pagan one as being superior and closer to a true comprehension of the nature of death and suffering.³⁹

³⁹ Since pagan faiths were dead, Swinburne could engage with them on a less shocking level than he could the Christianity still very much alive in this day; the gods were both obviously mortal and more distant from Swinburne, more subject to manipulation and to being acknowledged as creations of the human mind by

“Anactoria,” one of the poems that does this, as well as one of the longest of Swinburne’s several works that honor Sappho, has made critics uneasy since it appeared. Lang calls it “the most notorious of the Swinburnean “shockers” of unchallenged merit” (*Circle* 522). Rosenberg, in his 1967 essay on Swinburne, claims that the poem “get[s] out of hand” (xviii) and that “This anti-theist verse never succeeds as great poetry, although it is often great rhetoric” (*Selected* xx). The last claim can easily be disputed; “Anactoria” was one of the poems that Swinburne’s contemporaries had great difficulty in dismissing, as much as they would have liked to, because of its obvious aesthetic accomplishments. A. E. Housman, whose 1910 essay on Swinburne is mostly hostile, chooses lines from “Anactoria” to prove that Swinburne “resuscitated the heroic couplet” and that, when placed in “Anactoria’s” lines, mostly dependent on feminine rhymes, the heroic couplet’s “fulness and richness and variety are qualities of which one would never have supposed [it] to be capable” (par. 14).

But then, even Swinburne’s enemies have never denied that he possessed a technical mastery of rhyme and meter. What about the *matter* of the poem? “Anactoria” is, in Swinburne’s response to his critics in the 1866 *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, supposedly the poem that requires no explanation. It “has excited...a more vehement reprobation, a more virtuous horror, a more passionate appeal, than any other of my writing” (5), but, Swinburne explains, the meaning should be obvious for anyone who reads it, and that meaning is not really blasphemy or praise of lesbianism. It is Sappho’s “angry appeal against the supreme mystery of oppressive heaven, which is...to be taken as the first outcome or outburst of foiled and fruitless passion recoiling on itself” (*Notes* 7, 10). This assertion should be taken

Christian readers as well as by Swinburne himself. At the same time, the commonality of Classical education among educated upper-class men meant Swinburne had a built-in audience for his work.

with a rather large grain of salt.⁴⁰ “Anactoria” is, rather, a poem incorporating an understanding of Sappho as the supreme poet, as Swinburne thought she was, and one of the first that “makes a lesbian reading of Sappho sexually explicit” (Prins 112), but it also shows her as the supreme poet of the *natural world*, one of God’s creations turned against him and escaped. Perhaps Swinburne’s assertions about Sappho’s poetry in *Notes on Poems and Reviews* can be taken rather more seriously: “her verses strike and sting the memory in lonely places, or at sea, among all loftier sights and sounds—how they seem akin to fire and air, being themselves “all air and fire;” other element there is none in them” (9). His Sappho of “Anactoria” is strongly akin to the nightingale. Near the end of the poem, in a rising paean to the beauties of nature, words that themselves are music like the birdsongs she praises and what Jeffrey Herrick calls a “monument to magnificence [that] ventriloquizes itself as it imagines itself, from Swinburne as Sappho to the power of our mouths, a passing of proto-Promethean fire, its necessary air our own” (106), we are invited to sing with Sappho as we read it aloud, and in turn, we are invited to sing with the birds, the “Fierce clamour of the fiery nightingales,” and “long notes of birds/ Violently singing till the whole world sings” (l. 270, 274-5). The fact that human song sings of birdsong, and that “birds” is rhymed with “words” in line 273, binds humans and birds closely. A human voice is a bird’s voice is Sappho’s voice is a nightingale’s voice. They are akin, not blended so indistinguishably that

⁴⁰ Swinburne also claims that “Dolores,” his litany of a bisexual, sadomasochistic goddess, parts of which specifically parody the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary, and which was also published in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, “is so distinctly symbolic and fanciful that it cannot justly be amenable to judgment as a study in the school of realism” (*Notes on Poems and Reviews* 11), and denies that it has anything much to do with the context of the Christian religion. Yet he exulted in a letter to William Rossetti, “I have proved Dolores to be little less than a second Sermon on the Mount, and Anactoria...an archdeacon’s charge” (*Letters*, I, 144). Swinburne enjoyed claiming that his poetry or his literary opinions were orthodox on the surface and that his critics had merely failed to understand him, while employing an undercurrent of blasphemy and savage attack that would sound easily to the ears of the knowledgeable. He was delighted when his friend Powell “wrote to [him] that two dear old ladies in Wales believed *Anactoria* to be an Hymn to the Holy Virgin” (LaFourcade 137).

they seem only one—Sappho is still a distinct “I” from the reader and her lover Anactoria, and she mentions both nightingales and more generic birds, not one alone—but they are all singers. And Sappho is bitterly and endlessly opposed to a God who has filled the world with suffering and pain while doing nothing to share in those sensations.

The poem begins with Sappho’s calling to Anactoria, her faithless lover, to return. She would prefer death to separation: “I would the sea had hidden us, the fire/ (Wilt thou fear that, and fear not my desire?)/ Severed the bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves,/ And let our sifted ashes drop like leaves” (l. 7-10). Sappho’s imagery of death almost from the beginning involves returning to the elements that make a part of humanity, and a kinship between human beings who do so; her image of death is clothed round with flesh, and she has no fear of mortality. In fact, as the poem advances, it becomes clear that *immortality* is the ultimate separation from the world and, to any sane and human being, the ultimate torment. God, for no reason except delight in torture, “hath cursed/ Spirit and flesh with longing...filled with thirst/Their lips who cried unto him” (l. 175-178) and made humans feel “pulse by pulse...time grow through our veins” (l. 188). Sappho admits her inability to reach God except in imagination, just as the Chorus in *Atalanta in Calydon* cannot reach the god who is “the supreme evil.” But she knows his crimes, and if she could, “Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,/ Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,/ And mix his immortality with death” (l. 182-4). Desecration, the end of sacredness, is here linked inextricably to both mortality and breath, the passage of air in and out of the lungs as in birdsong or speech, itself another kind of interchange with the world. “Mix” is often Swinburne’s word, especially in *Poems and Ballads First Series*, for the binding of two opposites, in which they become tied to one another and thus capable of an exchange of

emotions like the kind that animals and humankind make when in a proper relationship. God without Sappho's touch is unmixed, pure—and thus separate and isolated, with no hope of communion. He is not part of the world he created, but Sappho is, and she is thus capable of far more with respect to that world, and the other creatures in it, than he is.

Sappho's world and the world of those other creatures is in flux, artistic and emotional and natural—Swinburne delivering even the poet whose songs give her a protracted life into the world of evolutionary indeterminacy—but the one permanent part of this change is death. Sappho claims in line 290, “Yea, though thou [Anactoria] diest, I say I shall not die,” because her art will live, but this poetic immortality (which Swinburne thought appropriate for Sappho, in part, because her poetry was still known in England centuries after her death) is subverted in three ways. First, Sappho's boast is a defiance of the transcendent God who “wields and wrecks [his creations], being more strong than they—/ But, having made me, me he shall not slay” (l. 251-2). Yopie Prins, in her study of the way Swinburne voices the poetess in *Victorian Sappho*, argues that Swinburne is not reaching for transcendence in “Anactoria,” because he scatters Sappho's voice so throughout the poem (133). Sappho, by virtue of not being transcendent, is free, the first example in Swinburne's poetry of a successful rebel against the supreme evil, because God cannot dictate the end of her life as he dictates others'. Something *else* will indeed slay Sappho, as the ending of the poem proves, but that will be a death in natural time, due to the ending of the world. This unnatural, immortal God cannot “wield or wreck” someone who has escaped from him into the realm of art and allied herself fully with nature.

This is the second subversion. Sappho does not just envision and dream of death, but glories in the kinship with the natural world that God has given her, though he surely did not

intend it to be a gift. Her music has “mixed” (thus making her the opposite of God, who is not mixed with anything) her into the ocean, and made her voice the voice of the tides; in “The immeasurable tremor of all the sea/ Memories shall mix and metaphors of me” (l. 213-214). Here Sappho enters most fully into music, riding the upswing towards the nightingales Swinburne will shortly introduce. Fire, lightning, music, and “the grasp of lip and hand” shall also remind any human listener familiar with Sappho’s songs of those songs, and thus of her (l. 204-211), and then there enter wings and birdsong into the poem: “Like me shall be the shuddering calm of night,/ When all the winds of the world for pure delight/ Close lips that quiver and fold up wings that ache;/ When nightingales are louder for love’s sake” (l. 215-218). The nightingales will remind the listener of Sappho’s voice because they are bound with her, inextricably, into that word of “pure delight” that God cannot enter. Here, death is joyous, and the artistic immortality that Sappho *could* use to outlive others wearisome and dreary. The anonymous nightingales who love and die like Sappho will perish *en masse*, as will the “herds” (l. 253) of humans who obey God’s will. The fate of one species is the same as the other. Sappho is contemptuous of other humans’ submission, but not of their joy, and she wishes to die in the same way.

This runs the danger of making Sappho an immortal goddess in and of herself, individuated above the “herds,” a resurrection of Christian worship rather than a rebellion against it. But as Prins points out, “As Sappho is revealed in the forces of nature, she becomes a force of nature herself” (132-3). The interchange and mixing is mutual. The lines immediately after those quoted above make it clear that certain emotions exist outside of Sappho, in the world, and that she is not the center of all passion. She moves beyond merely seeking reflections of her tormented love relationship with Anactoria and into finding the

reflection of greater realities—desire, time, the passage of seasons—within herself. “I am sick with time as these with ebb and flow...” (l. 225) she says of the world’s processes, and she feels “in my heart that grief consuming them...in my veins the thirst of these,/ And all the summer travail of the trees/And all the winter sickness” (l. 230-233). While humans can arguably conquer the seasons more than other animals do, by entering houses, wearing or discarding clothes, and moving more easily by means of wheeled transportation from place to place than animals migrate, Sappho plants herself in the center of the seasons and acknowledges their effect on her anyway. Thirst and sickness in the winter affect other creatures with bodies; thus they affect her. Sappho is an animal.

Acknowledgment of human emotions, like the “yearning in my veins,” is the necessary prelude to engagement with the natural world. “Anactoria” is not an outburst of unconsidered passion or simple devotion to nature and love that absorbs the emotions and leaves that one human at rest. Sappho must consciously recognize the relationships between herself and the natural world before she can articulate them, and, harder in the minds of many theistic Victorians who believed in special creation, she must also recognize her subjection to time, her grief at the changing of earth in the seasons that is the trees’ grief at the falling of their leaves, and the fact that the earth has “divided” (the word of separation that often stands as Swinburne’s opposite of “mix”) breath (l. 234), just like her, with her pleasure in artistic immortality as freedom from God and her longing for death, and her love and loathing of Anactoria.

The third subversion of immortality comes in the fact that even human artistic immortality ends at last; Sappho cannot escape the world into a transcendental spiritual realm inhabited only by the lord of creation whom she hates, and thus she will die when the world

dies. She welcomes this. She does not relish living forever, unlike God who cannot bear to die, and she will not; the end of the poem conveys her supreme weariness for “supreme sleep,” as well as the form the inevitable end shall take: drowning by the “insuperable sea” (l. 310). The end of the world and the end of time will destroy her, as they will destroy all the creatures who live in the world and through the passage of time. Here Swinburne’s poetic vision, assigned to Sappho, stretches to encompass something like the passage of geologic time, one of the constructs of Darwin’s imagination which distinguished him among Victorian writers; “this ability to sense with his intellectual pulses the ticking of an immeasurably slow cosmic clock is the grand peculiarity of [Darwin’s] mind” (Rosenberg *Elegy* 2). Swinburne lacks Darwin’s scientific credentials, but he adopted the idea of the immense passage of time and carried it away into more metaphoric, poetic (ir)realities. The ending of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, discussed below, was another place where Swinburne envisioned the future to end all futures, the end of the world, a natural apocalypse.

Sappho is likewise a singer who passes into death in Swinburne’s “On the Cliffs,” one of four long poems that appeared in his 1880 volume *Songs of the Springtides*. Here, however, she has been transformed into a literal nightingale, through a complicated process that also involves taking on a strain of the god Apollo.

What voice of God grown heavenlier in a bird,
Made keener of edge to smite
Than lightning...
But scarce one breathing-space, one heartbeat long,
Wilt thou take shadow of sadness on thy song.
Not thou, being more than man or man's desire,
Being bird and God in one,
With throat of gold and spirit of the sun...
Thou knowest, but inly by thine only name,
Sappho—because I have known thee and loved, hast thou
None other answer now?
As brother and sister were we, child and bird...

When thou wast but the tawny sweet winged thing
Whose cry was but of spring (l. 46-48, 92-96, 229-232, 238-239.)

The nightingale comes first, and has transformed the “voice of God” into a bird’s voice, not lowering it but making it grow “heavenlier.” When Apollo adds his “spirit of the sun” to the nightingale, he does not elevate it to literal heaven, but leaves it to sing, joyously, with “scarce one breathing-space...[of] shadow of sadness on thy song.” Then Sappho comes in, and she is literal kin to the speaker, sister as bird to his brother and child. For all that this Sappho is a blend of herself, singing with the voice of the Greek “Ninth Muse,” the Greek god of music, and a nightingale, Swinburne never lets the nightingale fade from the surface of the poem. The reader who follows the complicated transformation must continually face the fact that Sappho/Apollo is a bird in this incarnation, and that humans are still no less akin to her/him than they were when she/he was human or immortal. If, as Margot K. Louis states, “The joyous divinity of this nightingale is Apollonian, and is inseparable from the human creative power” (*Gods* 133), the equation also works the other way around; the power of musical god and human poet is inseparable from their current form as a bird. David G. Riede’s study of the poem carries this further. In arguing that Swinburne has replaced the Christian Trinity with a myth of his own, Riede outlines the description of the replacements as “Sappho, as the human incarnation of the divinity, replac[ing] Christ; mediating between the Apollonian immortality of song and the nightingale world of mortal love,” and analyzes Swinburne’s deliberately ambiguous use of pronouns and complex syntax as resulting in “the three [being] one, [so that] no matter which the poet addresses, he is addressing the other two as well” (196). The nightingale and the human are kin in body, in song, and in importance in a revised religious tradition.

Swinburne also gives himself, as narrator, a place in the poem, with the sea-mews who live on the cliffs where the nightingale sings. He talks of Sappho's song coming to him "A]t midnight to me/ Swimming, and birds about my happier head/ Skimming, one smooth soft way by water and air,/ To these my bright born brethren and to me" (l. 396-399). The narrator is himself in the middle of birds as well as kin to them, surrounded by them, perhaps about to draw in the long breath that Herrick claims is necessary to try and plunge through Swinburne's breathless periods (102) to voice the internal rhyming words "Swimming...Skimming," both with commas after them, that likewise tie boy and birds together. Swinburne credits Sappho in this poem with giving him the ability to sing, "For songless were we sea-mews" (l. 405). In other poems he will position the sea-mew itself as the supreme bird, joyous in the rapture of its flight and plunge into the sea as the nightingale cannot be. In this world of transformed night-Sapph-Apoll-o-gale, however, it is Sappho, and the nightingale, who reign supreme. The speaker's kinship to her gives him some of her gifts; as Margot Louis puts it, "it is Sappho's (and the speaker's) intense consciousness of temporality, together with a passionately articulate frustration in the face of an indifferent deity, that permits her (and him) to conquer time at last. Swinburne and his persona will never claim any certain triumph higher than this transformation of perception, but that in itself is an experience of absolute value" (*Gods* 139). Swinburne has not completely "conquered time," because Sappho's rebirth in the nightingale itself brings the specter of death to the fore, and his reminiscences in the poem on the passage of time—from boy when he first heard the nightingale, to singing brother who understands her more fully now—make it absolutely clear that time still passes, that creatures live and die. This is joy in time, in a changing world, not in immortality. But it is joy in a world where the speaker can be taught

by his nightingale-sister and rejoice in the company of his seabird brothers, and where birds and humans can sing with sibling voices.

Birds and the Death of the Afterlife: “The Garden of Proserpine” and “Hertha”

Not all of Swinburne’s poetry in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* requires such open defiance of God as “Anactoria” did. It would be difficult to find a poem in Swinburne’s repertoire more favoring the kinship of mortality between humanity and nature than “The Garden of Proserpine,” which Lang calls Swinburne’s most familiar poem (*Circle* 515). Like a different poem, “Hymn to Proserpine,” also included in the book, this poem presents the image of the goddess of death, the daughter of earth, offering death as a gift to the speaker weary of life. One of the most remarkable techniques which this poem uses is to introduce images of barrenness, weariness, and death, and then show that even they are insufficient to represent the reality of the garden. The speaker is “tired” of “tears and laughter...Blown buds of barren flowers,/ Desires and dreams and powers/ And everything but sleep” (l. 9, 14-16). The “barren flowers,” then, are part of the mortal, waking world, rather than the garden. Likewise, the third stanza names “Wan waves and wet winds” and “Weak ships and spirits” (l. 19-20), but concludes with, “But no such winds blow hither,/And no such things grow here” (l. 23-24). The poem is a drive toward quietus. As such, it, as well as its anti-theism, might seem a mere negative force, in the way that atheism is often seen, destroying the consolations of a spiritual view of the world without offering a positive alternative.

In “The Garden of Proserpine,” however, there is a positive alternative in the sense of its having its own existence, though not in the sense of a consolation. That alternative is oblivion. Humans and all other natural things in the world will die. And the speaker is someone who can find comfort in this, in the sharing of death and the inescapability of it. If

there was an escape to take, an afterlife, then humans would have to go on existing after their deaths; there would be no rest and no freedom from emotions or sensations. But there is, and whether one accepts that or not, Proserpine “waits for all men born” (l. 58). The ones who are indeed weary and will “thank with brief thanksgiving/ Whatever gods may be/ That no life lives for ever;/ That dead men rise up never”(l. 83-6) are the ones, in this case, who give themselves fully to reality and are absorbed into natural cycles, the ending and the dying part of nature, rather than comforting themselves with a fantasy of a nature-denying (because in denial of change and decay) afterlife.

The garden is also filled with other beings, or rather with the remains of them. As McGann points out, “In an entirely un-Wordsworthian sense, Swinburne summons men to be rolled round in earth’s diurnal course with rocks and stones and trees” (245). Swinburne is careful throughout the poem to maintain the fact that not only men die and come to Proserpine. “And spring and seed and swallow/ Take wing for her and follow” (l. 61-62) despite the fact that no living birds or flowers exist in the garden, as the next lines make clear. Swallows are not the nightingales or the sea-mews that appear more frequently in Swinburne’s poetry, but they are birds which are often used as symbols of returning spring, and with it, returning seeds. Louis A. Losada states that “what was particularly noted within [the swallow’s] migratory cycle was its reappearance at springtime. Its vernal return was commonly described throughout Greek literature” (33). In the Classical context of Swinburne’s poem, then, swallows *should* be the messengers of the bright cycle of life. Instead, they “take wing for her.” Proserpine, not only her garden, is made the destination of the birds who traditionally draw spring in their wake. Human symbolism is turned on its head, the swallows made equivalent and independent actors in the inescapable drama of

dying. Birds that humans live with and enjoy are as mortal as they are, and will pass into the same place and to the same goddess.

There is some uncertainty in the poem itself as to how much of that “place” is an actual place and an actual afterlife. If the garden of Proserpine is an afterlife, it is not one that is constructed, like the heaven and hell the speaker denies exist (l. 43-4), to appeal to human notions of rightness or righteousness. It is, perhaps, the *best* and least barren landscape that humans can imagine when they begin to pay attention to what the kinship of mortality means. And in the end, that landscape does not endure to provide an actual alternative to the end of life. Though the fifth stanza of the “Garden” describes a sunrise “By cloud and mist abated” (l. 39), and Swinburne frequently uses the dawn in *Songs Before Sunrise* and *Tristram of Lyonesse* as a symbol of hope, the last stanza denies two times that the sun will return. “Then star nor sun shall waken...Nor days nor things diurnal;/ Only the sleep eternal/ In an eternal night” (l. 89, 94-6). This conclusion agrees with the afterlife described in line 101 of the “Hymn to Proserpine,” the “Garden’s” kindred poem, “under heavens untrod by the sun,” and with the “poppied sleep, the end of all,” in “Ilicet,” perhaps Swinburne’s bleakest poem, which immediately follows the “Hymn to Proserpine” in the originally published *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, and says that death is permanent: “The grave's mouth laughs unto derision/ Desire and dread and dream and vision/ Delight of heaven and sorrow of hell” (l. 34-36). The landscape of Proserpine’s garden melts away, and eternal night enfolds the humans, animals, plants, and sensations that have come there. Thus, even when Swinburne’s poetry envisions an afterlife, it is only a temporary stopping place before oblivion. And the “we” in the latter part of the poem “thank with brief thanksgiving/ Whatever gods there be” for it. If the consciousness needed to fight one’s way to an appreciation of the links between

humanity and other mortal beings is painful, as it is for Sappho (and as it was for Darwin) and the only image of the afterlife possible promises despair, at least one can have the end of consciousness after the end of life.

The theme of kinship appears more and more often in Swinburne's poetry after 1871 and on into the much-less-studied "Putney Period,"⁴¹ as the expression of the death urge is modified and transformed. Swinburne thinks "the revelation of the world can be exclusively associated with moments of joy and happiness only at the expense of human existence. [Yet] Tragedy itself is not enough" (McGann 174). Rather than escaping into absolutes of emotion, humanity should accept the existence of both absolutes and give themselves in service to the causes of their kind and to the natural world itself (which, in Swinburne's worldview, are not opposed). Acceptance of death, the kinship of mortality that humans have with animals, is a theme carried over from the earlier poetry and transformed into the victory of freedom.

The poem most important for stating this central fact of Swinburne's later philosophy is "Hertha," published in his 1871 book of verse, *Songs Before Sunrise*, ostensibly directed at the revolution in Italy, but in reality more general and meant to apply to any time and place where people were fighting for liberty and republicanism. "Hertha" is "another mystic atheistic democratic anthropologic poem," as Swinburne wrote in an 1869 letter to his friend William Rossetti. Several years later, in 1875, in a letter to E. C. Stedman, who had asked him for an autobiography of himself, he could still say, "Of all I have done I rate *Hertha*

⁴¹ Rikki Rooksby imagines in the Introduction of his biography of Swinburne, *A. C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life*, a world where Swinburne was shot in his early 30s, shortly after publishing his (in reality never-finished) novel *Lesbia Brandon*. Rooksby believes such an assassination at the height of his talent would have made Swinburne into a respected, mourned figure, along the lines of Keats and Shelley, because critics could then have dreamed that his best poetry was yet to come. Instead, in 1879, after Swinburne nearly drank himself to death, he was rescued by his friend Theodore Watts-Dunton and kept under virtual house arrest—that is, away from alcohol and flagellation brothels—for the last thirty years of his life. The poetry of the "Putney Period" has been scorned by some critics as not a worthy successor of the brilliancy visible in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. It should be noted that Rooksby himself does not hold this view, and has called for a reevaluation of the later poetry, in particular *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

highest as a single piece, finding in it the most of lyric force and music combined with the most of condensed and clarified thought. I think there really is a good deal compressed and concentrated into that poem” (McGann and Sligh 472). This compression and concentration is one of the many examples in Swinburne’s corpus of a poem that demands extra attention and time; attempting to read it too fast will cause the reader to become lost in the ideas and grammar.

“Hertha” is named after and spoken in the voice of the Germanic earth goddess, but the poem is not theological, except in the sense that it sets forth the “proper” relationship between humanity and the earth, which is not one of slavery or worship. As Lang says in his notes on the poem in *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, “The ideas are those of nineteenth-century evolutionary science and positivism” (516). Hertha, like the protagonists of earlier Swinburne poems, uses Biblical language, but this time in order to make a point about the spirit behind that language. Lang adds that in this case, ““Nature” [is] speaking in the very language and rhythm of that which she controverts (rather, of which she assumes the non-existence)” (516), the Christian God. Like Darwin’s theories, Swinburne’s poem creates a world of nature that does not require the Christian God in order to exist. Hertha treats Biblical language like an obstacle which she is required to adapt to and grow around, and humans as her children, a species who will supplant and hasten the extinction of her earlier children, gods.

The evolutionary language expands the voice of the goddess to encompass the span of geologic time and the lives of other species as well as humans. Hertha is the earth, the literal parent of everything else that follows. “I am that which began,” is the poem’s first line, with the double meaning of that which existed before everything else and that which starts life.

Primacy of place and creation are denied to the Christian God. In fact, Hertha refers to the Christian God as one of her creations. The lines “Out of me God and man...God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily; I am the soul” (l. 3-5) involve God in the evolutionary process. If God, too, can alter, then his perfection is in question; he is neither immortal, nor always consistent, nor omnipotent over the earth’s powers. And, of course, if he is a child of the earth, then arguments opposed to Darwin’s, which depended on humans having a special place in the world because created in the image of God and humans owing fealty to the Creator because of his immense power over the Creation, are undermined. While “Hertha” functions as the voice of the earth goddess, it works on the level of advancing Darwin’s ideas and destroying the immense gulf that many Christians of Swinburne’s day believed to exist between perfect God and fallen humankind, as well as between humans and animals.

Another, fainter implication here is that God himself might *devolve*, a concern (with respect to humans) among some Victorian writers. In H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She*, for example, the immortal, wise, goddess-like heroine shrinks into a monkey-like figure before she dies, reversing the evolutionary “progression” from primate to human. The echoes of such ideas in “Hertha” render Swinburne’s allusion to God even more blasphemous than usual, because God, too, might shrink and change into a non-entity—as he in fact does later in the poem.

But since Hertha is a goddess, the vision the poem proposes might simply seem to replace the worship of God with the worship of Nature, succeeding Christianity by pantheism rather than atheism. The answer to this problem lies in the lines that state the “master-root” of the poem, according to Swinburne, the stanza in which Hertha denies that she needs worship, unlike the gods born of her:

I bid you but be;

I have need not of prayer;
I have need of you free
As your mouths of mine air;
That my heart may be greater within me, beholding the fruits of me fair (l.
156-160).

This denies both the bondage of fear that, in Hertha's eyes, ties her children to the Christian God, and the implication that because Hertha is all that exists—"Beside or above me/ Nought is there to go" (l. 16-17)—humans cannot be free because they cannot escape from nature. The non-escape from nature is an accepted fact in the universe Swinburne creates; humans are animals, surrounded, environed, by natural forces, and there is no afterlife except such as they may find in the body and memory of Hertha. But they retain free will. Their choice, unlike the Christian choice between defiance of or submission to God's will, is whether to struggle uselessly, looking for a bodiless transcendence that does not exist, or to accept reality with love and so learn joy even in suffering, even in death. Their gifts will be the "Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy thought, and red fruit of thy death" (l. 80) in return for the "life-blood and breath" that Hertha gives them (l. 78). Swinburne thus goes beyond some other Victorian authors (for example, Meredith) in shedding both implicit and explicit ideas of progress sometimes assumed to be inherent in evolution.⁴² Humans will not evolve upward and outward from nature; instead, they are involved in a cycle in which they return to the earth like other animals, and even the "white flowers of thought," the product of the brains they use to discover Hertha's secrets, are fodder for earth in the end, not the product of divine inspiration that stretches beyond it. They are literal kin to Hertha, children to her mother, but Hertha's firm re-statement of the relationship ensures that it will be non-hierarchical.

⁴² Michael Ruse argues in his essay "The Origin Of *The Origin*" that Darwin himself "accepted some form of biological progress," but not "inevitable upward change for the better" (12), and discusses the unsettled arguments among historians about how much the idea of progress is part of the theory of natural selection.

The denial of this kinship and the exchange of gifts—life for death—as McGann says, results in futility:

But to maintain that [regenerative] activity men must give themselves to time and an impermanent, transformational existence. Those who freely give themselves to mortality are Swinburne's "enduring dead," whose lives are known through their relations with others, through correspondences... On the other hand, those who struggle to escape mortality, who struggle against the free gift of Hertha, find that even what they have been given will be taken away (251).

Death must be lived with and accepted, as Darwin pointed out in *The Origin of Species*, because it is the food of life. The Christian dream of heaven, part of the "struggle to escape mortality," is a dangerous delusion for Swinburne because it denies the nature of existence (impermanent and transformational) and the kinship of mortality that ultimately ties humans to other species. Like those other species, Swinburne says, humans will not live forever.⁴³ In a letter to William Michael Rossetti written at the time Swinburne was composing "Hertha," the poet admits that it is *possible* a creative force beyond nature exists, "but [atheists] would say, if so, what then? and is it well, if we could ever so honestly, to swallow a crude hypothesis to no practical end, when the actual mass of the natural facts of being is surely big enough to exercise our spirits?" (*Letters* II.316) This "actual mass of...facts" is "big enough" for Swinburne, implying that he needs no transcendent space located outside it in the spiritual realm to "exercise" his spirit. Seeking hungrily after such a hypothesis is another way of denying the gifts of Hertha and therefore falling into futility. And "Hertha," in both poem and goddess, is itself a challenging enough picture to demand much spiritual and intellectual contemplation of the kind often spent on Christianity: "a static poem about growth" (Lang

⁴³ In some of his letters, Swinburne expresses regret that he cannot accept immortality as his believing friends and family members do, because he could then be assured that he would meet Victor Hugo and other beloved people he lost after death. But he never manages to settle into any certainty concerning it, writing instead a series of yearning elegies that work themselves up into lyrical flights of praise centered more on the lasting effect of the dead on the living than on any picture of heaven.

Circle 516), though static only in the same way that the life of animals or the evolutionary process is, an endlessly repeating cycle that contains many individual changes and is never the same from moment to moment.

A bird exists in “Hertha,” too, and also in Hertha. Describing noises of thunder and storms that wrack her branches, Hertha says,

That noise is of Time,
As his feathers are spread
And his feet set to climb
Through the boughs overhead,
And my foliage rings round him and rustles, and branches are bent with his tread (l. 116-120).

Time itself is the bird here, rather than what the bird helps the speaker to endure, as in “On the Cliffs.” He is not, in this case, flying, but climbing, perhaps to enforce the image of time itself being immanent in the earth. Still, as humans are Hertha, are part of Hertha, along with “wild-beast and bird” (l. 15), they are also entangled with Time. No escape from death, but joy in life.

The idea of interchange, once conceived in “Hertha,” is everywhere in Swinburne’s poetry, blurring boundaries between humans and other creatures. While Swinburne’s human narrators retain enough of a difference from other species to converse about them in language, they do not have any of the other differences—a relationship to God, immortality, transcendent freedom—that have often been used to fuel human exceptionalism.

This idea has an ecocritical counterpart. Neil Evernden, in his essay “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy” in the collection *Landmarks in Ecocriticism*, urges his readers to think of themselves as open at the borders, organisms involved in continual giving and receiving of gifts—such as air, food, and carbon dioxide—with other organisms. In talking about inter-relatedness, “the subversive tenet of Ecology,” Evernden

advises that we should stop thinking of human beings as independent, discrete beings, and open ourselves at the borders to the rest of the world—mentally, as we already are physically. “I emphasize again, it is to be taken quite literally, not simply as an indication of casual connectedness. Where do you draw the line between one creature and another?” (95). Groups of organisms have co-evolved together, the adaptations in one species driving adaptations in another. It is a difficult concept to grasp, counterintuitive, in many ways disquieting, the ultimate vanishing of the line between humans and animals. But it is part of evolutionary theory, and it is part of Swinburne’s poetic creations. This may be one of the reasons for the difficulty in reading him McGann discusses in *Swinburne: an Experiment in Criticism*: meanings mutate and change, proliferate in different directions, and erupt into each other (174-5). So, too, do humans and animals in Swinburne’s world mingle, not completely blurring into one another in a mystical union, but becoming akin in many ways not immediately apparent on the surface.

Creatures of the Sea: *Tristram of Lyonesse*

Swinburne’s later poetry—that is, his poetry written after the 1878 publication of *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*—has tended to attract critical disapproval. It is true that Swinburne’s later poetry is not always up to the quality of his earlier writing, either in originality of ideas or in beauty of language. He wrote many poems praising babies, many elegies for dead friends—mostly poets and artists—cursed with monotony, and many “roundels,” the poetic form he modified from the French rondel, which were too easy for him and did not encourage complex composition. The scouting of these poems before further study, however, is hasty, and lately critical opinion has begun to turn in their favor. Among them are several magnificent works that explore the human relationship to deity, animals,

and the sea in ways that his earlier poetry, more consumed by themes of defiance of the gods and the wrath of nature, could not have managed.

The centerpiece of the poetry after 1879 must go to *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Swinburne's epic Arthurian poem in nine cantos, which has gradually been eclipsing some of Swinburne's earlier poetry, like his 1876 drama *Erechtheus*, in critical favor (Rooksby "Selecting" 164). Swinburne had written the "Prelude" (published separately) as early as 1869, but the rest was completed only by 1882, when it was published in a book with many other poems. The poem is as Rooksby describes it, the embodiment of some themes on which Swinburne was always concentrating and the fulfillment of others he had only approached: "Swinburne pours his spirit into a legend which had fascinated him from boyhood and, in so far as it is a celebration of consummated love, it enables him, in poetry at least, to reverse the 'reverse experience' which had left his 'young manhood a barren stock'" ("Algernonicon" 74).⁴⁴ This reverse may have increased—though it did not cause—his fascination with sterility, barrenness, and tragic love that passes away unfulfilled.

Tristram is different. As John Rosenberg notes in his 1967 essay on Swinburne, which helped increase critical interest in him, "In this central legend symbolizing the love-sickness of the Western world, Swinburne creates by far his healthiest love poetry" (*Selected* xiii). Iseult and Tristram are doomed from the moment they taste the love potion that will bind them together and cause Iseult to be unfaithful to her promised husband, King Mark of Cornwall, but the poem is nevertheless full of joy, and they do not suffer guilt because of their actions. A large part of that joy comes from the scenes which the lovers spend together in the woods and on the sea, where the metaphors and similes linking them to nature become

⁴⁴ The "barren stock" phrase is from a letter Swinburne had written to his friend Edmund Gosse in 1875 to congratulate him on his marriage. In the letter, he implies that he had experienced a rejection of love when he was young that made it impossible for him to marry.

fluid, destabilizing the separation of humans from the physical world around them; the flowers, the animals, the waves described come to matter as much as the physical sensations of making love, and are the best way, given how extensive these interlinkages become, to relate to them. The cycle of constantly blending and not sharply delineated images mirrors the liminal moments in which Tristram and Iseult linger, not quite day or night, in a place not quite earth or sea. *Tristram* is the one of Swinburne's poems about which McGann's judgment, that "his poetry tends not to move in a direction, like a path, but to accumulate additions, like coral" (41), might be most fairly applied. It reflects, as well, Swinburne's wholesale adoption of evolutionary theory's commitment to change and to indeterminacy, without definite end; Swinburne uses deep thematic elements from evolution in his poetry, but also places it in his language. Human becomes animal becomes human, in a spreading web of kinship, while the ultimate end of Swinburne's hero and heroine—in the sea—and the strong focus on nature as more than simply setting or allegory of human love, but as an actor in and of itself, keep the web of links from becoming conventional.

It is, too, the home of the most complete fascination with sea-mews and other birds in Swinburne's poetry; the lovers, especially Tristram, become them, are them, and are surrounded by birds from the first canto, in which their ship the *Swallow* carries Iseult and Tristram to King Mark's castle and to the moment of doom when their lips meet on the magic cup, to the ninth canto, when a wounded Tristram dies because his wife, Iseult of Brittany, tricks him into believing that another ship, the *Swan*, is not carrying his lover Iseult to tend him.

It is not surprising that sea-mews are the most common birds in *Tristram*, since Swinburne's identification with the sea-mew ran deep. His later poem "To a Seamew" (1886)

claims literal kinship with it, as the 1880 “On the Cliffs” had already done: “When I had wings, my brother,/ Such wings were mine as thine” (l. 1-2). In a letter to Mary Louisa Molesworth, Swinburne declares, “I consider the story of the seagull [that Molesworth had written] a personal attention or admonition, for in my boyhood I was always regarded at home as belonging naturally to that tribe” (*Letters*, V, 1399). And in an 1866 letter to his friend, M. D. Conway, who had written a review of Whitman’s poetry, he remarks, “I knew that the man who had spoken as he [Whitman] has of the sea must be a fellow seabird with me; and I would give something to have a dip in the rough water with him” (*Letters*, I, 160). Not only the wings or affinity with the sea-mew mattered to Swinburne; so, too, did the deep trust with which they flung themselves into the water and the air. “The leap of loving faith which sea-mews...take unreflectingly is the only leap we can take, even as the transient rapture of earth is the only rapture we can certainly feel” (*Gods* 188) declares Margot K. Louis of Swinburne’s later poetry. And it is reflective of another kind of kinship, that between author and character, that Swinburne chooses to give the hero of his late masterpiece closeness to his most beloved bird.

Sea-mews are not the only birds that Swinburne uses to link Tristram and Iseult to the physical world that surrounds them. Their first ship, the *Swallow*, has a bird’s name and a bird’s figure, both literal and not, in the form of a carved figurehead: “Above the stem a gilded swallow shone,/ Wrought with straight wings and eyes of glittering stone/ As flying sunward oversea, to bear/ Green summer with it through the singing air” (I. 11-14). The flight “sunward oversea” and the act of placing the swallow on a ship turn the swallow into a sea-bird as it is not when it appears in “The Garden of Proserpine.” The audience can hold in mind the fact that swallows are not “really” sea-birds while making an exception for this one,

and see, in retrospect, the foreshadowing of the sea-bird theme. As well, via Tristram and Iseult's conversation on the *Swallow*, a reader can see a bird leading them into acceptance of death and doubt about whether the Christian God is truly a deity they want to follow.

While Iseult is described as glorious through glorious language—Swinburne spends twelve lines of the first canto on Iseult's eyes alone, including such description as “Azure and gold and ardent grey, made strange/ With fiery difference and deep interchange/ Inexplicable of glories multiform” (I. 37-39)—the narrator hastens to involve her, also, in death and doubt. Iseult's eyes begin to glow less with life and more with foreknowledge of death as this canto, the longest in the poem, proceeds. “And with her sweet eyes sunken, and the mirth/ Dead in their look as earth lies dead in earth/That reigned on earth and triumphed” (I. 327-29) reminds Iseult and the reader both that her beauty is not immortality; even the legend that guarantees the survival of her name and which Swinburne's narrator praises in the “Prelude” is not immortality. Triumph in the end leads only to the grave. A similar lesson awaits Tristram, who is blithely confident that knights' good deeds shall live forever even when they die, ““For surely, though time slay us, yet shall we/ Have such high name and lordship of good days/ As shall sustain us living, and men's praise/ Shall burn a beacon lit above us dead”” (I. 387-391). Tristram's deeds are not the primary reason that he grows famous in the poem, or that King Mark, his romantic rival, builds a chapel for him and Iseult's bodies in the end; that honor, instead, comes from his doomed romance with Iseult. Characters' imaginings of immortality are sharply curbed and rebuked by the ultimate tendency of the lyric and the more knowledgeable narrator, as can be seen in the difference in attitude between the narrated description of Iseult's eyes and Tristram's direct dialogue seen above.

Once again, as in “The Garden of Proserpine” and “Hertha,” humans are not immortal animals, because there is no such thing.

This does not mean that characters are never right or never have imaginings that are encouraged by the narrator. When Tristram tells Iseult that King Arthur and his half-sister Morgause slept together not knowing of their relationship and are cursed by God forever for the sin and the birth of their son Mordred, Iseult replies wonderingly, ““Great pity it is and strange it seems to me/ God could not do them so much right as we,/ Who slay not men for witless evil done”” (I. 403-405). Swinburne rejects God and has Iseult reject God in several places in the poem, but this is the earliest, and makes of “witless” sin a simple question of compassion and love. Love is the most powerful force in the poem; later, when Iseult has the chance to repent after she and Tristram have been discovered and Tristram sent away, she comes to refusal of repentance through a similar question and answer process.

“Shall I repent, Lord God? shall I repent?
Nay, though thou slay me! for herein I am blest,
That as I loved him yet I love him best —
More than mine own soul or thy love or thee,
Though thy love save and my love save not me.
Blest am I beyond women even herein,
That beyond all born women is my sin,
And perfect my transgression: that above
All offerings of all others is my love” (V. 82-90).

With a touch of Swinburne’s usual blasphemy—Iseult is “Blest...beyond women” in a rather different way than the Virgin Mary—this is the rebellious declaration of the heroine of the poem, who even while she prays for Tristram’s salvation realizes that he would be miserable in heaven without her, and embraces three chances to run away with Tristram, including the voyage she takes to his deathbed. By contrast, her rival, Iseult of Brittany, a “maiden wife” because Tristram will not sleep with her after the wedding, dedicates Canto VII to imploring

God for vengeance and tormenting herself into agonies when she thinks of Tristram and Iseult getting away with their sins. Rooksby points out that she spends time “invoking a God of righteous revenge who is but a projection of her own hatred” (“Algernonicon” 87). Her submission to God, and her belief that God will answer her prayer and perfectly echoes the hatred in her heart, deifies her rage rather than the love that Iseult feels. As a result, Iseult of Brittany is marked by weakness and loss. Even her final lie to Tristram, that Iseult has not come to nurse him, which leads him to die of a broken heart, is not a triumph. She fades out of the story after that, and it becomes the story of Tristram and Iseult’s burial and then the sea that consumes their chapel.

There is another sign, besides her invocation of a nonexistent God, that Iseult of Brittany does not share Iseult’s status as heroine. Canto V opens and closes with Tristram’s hound Hodain, who sits close beside Iseult and mourns the absence of Tristram as she does. While Hodain is not a bird as most of the other mentioned animals in the poem are, he does share certain bird-like characteristics. His hunting with Tristram in the woods is described as “Spring[ing] and pant[ing] in his breath with bright desire/ To be among the dewy ways on quest” (V. 14-15). “Springing” will later be one of the words used to describe both a seabird’s motion and Tristram’s. Hodain cannot fly, but he moves like a bird, he moves like Tristram, and he longs for Tristram “[w]ith all his heart and all his loving will/ Desiring one divided from his sight” (V. 20-21), while at the same time following Iseult as the last link to his master, “[s]oothed hardly but soothed only with her hand” (V. 18). Iseult and Tristram relate to each other through the body of the dog when they are apart, a dog who is kin to them both, and thus maintain no true separation. In her love for the dog, Iseult is also different from Iseult of Brittany, who sits alone, with no animal near, consumed by her

hatred. At the end of the fifth Canto, when Iseult has begun to despair of seeing Tristram again, she turns around and sees Hodain. “And all her heart went out in tears: and he/ Laid his kind head along her bended knee,/Till round his neck her arms went hard, and all/ The night past from her as a chain might fall” (V. 332-335). Iseult and Hodain can comfort each other for fleeting moments of joy against the intense emptiness that Tristram’s absence leaves behind. If this comfort is not permanent or long-lasting—it is notable that both times Hodain’s name ends a line in this Canto, it rhymes with the word “pain”—still it exists, and it frees Iseult into a world of love and kinship when her great love is not with her.

However, Iseult’s and Tristram’s largest and longest relationships are with winged things. Tristram is another singer, a famous harper, who sings like a bird in the opening Canto, and serves as a mode of transition from swallow metaphors to seabird ones. His eyes are not described as thoroughly as Iseult’s, but the effect they have on the people around him is mentioned; “all that warmed them at his eyes/ Loved them as larks that kindle as they rise/ Toward light they turn to music love the blue strong skies” (I. 93-95). When he sings, “Song spr[ings] between his lips and hands, and shone/ Singing, and strengthened and sank down thereon/ As a bird settles to the second flight” (I. 98-100). The effect his eyes and song have on Iseult specifically is also mentioned, as he leads her away from thoughts of union and God that she had been brooding on and back to the real world around them. “So went she musing down her thoughts,” the narrator says, while Tristram, “[s]weet-hearted as a bird that takes the sun/ With clear strong eyes and feels the glad god run/ Bright through his blood and wide rejoicing wings,/ And opens all himself to heaven and sings” (I. 671-674), plays music that is “words and songs the gladdest grown on earth,/ Till she was blithe and high of heart as he” (I. 676-677). While Tristram’s resemblance to the birds is metaphorical, Swinburne expands

the connection in part by the length of his similes, so that there are often more poetic lines about the bird than about the human in each specific comparison, and in part by tying the song that Tristram sings to the song larks and other birds sing, a physical noise whose shared similarity between birds and humans is more than metaphorical. Tristram's kinship with a songbird is likewise a kinship of joy, and it is that connection that he offers Iseult, drawing her away from dark thoughts and into life. While the characters cannot forget their mortality, and are generally wrong in their thoughts of what will evade or outlast it, they also cannot think of mortality all the time. They yield to joy as they yield to tragedy, and must live both to have a full, animal life.

In the fourth canto, the seabird metaphors appear in overwhelming numbers to sustain Tristram much as Hodain sustains Iseult in Canto V. Though King Mark, after finding Tristram and Iseult in the woods, at first believes they have not been lovers because they have a sword laid between them, rumor soon convinces him otherwise, and Tristram is condemned to die. He is taken to a chapel next to the sea (rather like the one that Mark will build for the lovers at the end of the poem). There, the knights who have brought him prepare to slay him, but Tristram escapes by wrenching loose and then leaping into the sea. He survives the plunge and the subsequent swim that brings him to Brittany because of having a sea-mew's communion with the sea, and the utter trust he feels that the water will bear him up, or, if fatal to him, that it will at least give him a more honorable death than he would find at the hands of Mark's knights.

As Tristram makes up his mind to leap, the poet adds the first extended allusion to the sea-mew, or common British seagull. Tristram, who earlier/later in the third canto (which takes place after this one despite the earlier place it occupies in the poem) seeks to share the

knowledge of water-weeds and heather, literally sees with a sea-mew's eyes as he gazes at the water, and understands the links that join the sea and the land. He sees the way to "swim/ Right out by the old blithe way the sea-mew takes/Across the bounding billow-belt" (IV. 87-89). That way technically separates him from land and from Iseult, who has been left behind in King Mark's castle, but the sea-mew's way is also a bridge, since "the loud bright chain it makes/To bind the bridal bosom of the land/ Time shall unlink not ever, till his hand/ Fall by its own last blow dead" (IV. 90-93). For a bird, the boundary between water and land, as between air and land, is minimal. Tristram is full of joy even contemplating a jump and a swim that might leave him dead. Death does not occur as a source of sorrow to a sea-mew; it leaps in a "blithe" manner that echoes Tristram and Iseult's feelings of blitheness in Canto I. To achieve this delicate balance of awareness of death and acceptance of joy, Tristram must embrace the bird's worldview, rather than asserting his human worldview in place of the bird's. Tristram's relationship to the sea as a bird is primary, occupying a good portion of his thoughts, equal to his love relationship with Iseult, because the love of humans, in him, has not driven away the love of the natural world; to love one is to love the other. Here he is the opposite of the drowners, like Sappho, who would mingle their essence with the sea and never return to the light if they could. Though he has suffered, he has also known joy, and the reader has already seen him accept that the world need not care about his suffering.⁴⁵ These things combine to give him an attitude which keeps him afloat. Swinburne also endows Tristram with the kinship that he himself felt, as poet, to the sea-mew, and thus gives him an added lightness and love of the water.

⁴⁵ In Canto III, which chronologically takes place later than this scene, Tristram has admitted to the sun that it will shine even when he is gone, that he knows this, and has begged the sun to "'Forgive us [humans] that we held ourselves so great!'" (III. 100).

There is another extended sea-mew allusion a few lines later, as Tristram makes the choice to stop estimating the height and leap. The perspective on these lines is even more clearly nonhuman, first using the gull's eyes and then the viewpoint of the light itself, and going beyond the instinct that gulls have to fly above the sea to attribute sheer joy to the bird. The joy of the bird becomes Tristram's joy, with Tristram, this time, seeming a metaphor of the gull rather than the other way around. Even the waves are glad to receive the sea-mew skimming above them, and Tristram, bird-joy personified as human, does not stand a chance of drowning here.

And as the sea-gull hovers high, and turns
With eyes wherein the keen heart glittering yearns
Down toward the sweet green sea whereon the broad noon burns,
And suddenly, soul-stricken with delight,
Drops, and the glad wave gladdens, and the light
Sees wing and wave confuse their fluttering white,
So Tristram one brief breathing-space apart
Hung, and gazed down; then with exulting heart
Plunged: and the fleet foam round a joyous head
Flashed, that shot under, and ere a shaft had sped
Rose again radiant, a rejoicing star,
And high along the water-ways afar
Triumphed... (IV. 99-111).

Here is perhaps the ultimate coexistence of human and sea, and human and bird. Tristram does not "hang apart" for more than "one brief breathing-space." Nor does he desire to lose his essence utterly to the sea in the way that Sappho has yearned for in "Anactoria." What Tristram has is better than that, the embraced, embowered, rejoicing consciousness.

And he spreads joy around him, as a bird does. The sea-mew is "soul-stricken with delight," an excellent way of conveying joy so intense that it becomes pain. As he "Drops, and the glad wave gladdens," even the sea takes on some of his joy. The consciousness of the animal awakens consciousness in the natural elements around him, including the light which

“Sees wing and wave confuse their fluttering white.” Animals here have a privileged position over humans, both in the fact that the sea-mew comes first in this passage and occupies a good half of it, and in that the animal’s perception endows sunlight and waves with life, instead of a human observer watching the plunge of the sea-mew and deciding that the waves and light must feel a certain way. This kinship, of course, does run up against the limit of Swinburne’s literal authorship, since he is a human writing the poem from the outside and the one who makes the decision to, arguably, anthropomorphize sea-mew, sun, and wave together. However, he does the same thing for Tristram, so if all his creations are fictional, they at least stand on the same footing of equality.

They stand, too, on the same footing of gladness. The sea-mew feels “yearning” and “delight” for the water, and “gladdens” the wave; Tristram has an “exulting heart” and “a joyous head,” and is “a rejoicing star.” The fall could kill either of them, and causes at least the sea-mew pain in its soul even with the delight, but that embrace of death and suffering is what lets them feel the joy. There is no God in this passage to be left outside the joy binding creatures, as there is in “Anactoria,” but in this passage Swinburne reaches a height of lyric intensity that does not need one. Here is pure kinship, and the relation between human and bird is flowing, intercharged, complete. They have no need to glance up and notice an outsider to prove the validity of what they share, and this is perhaps the most powerful moment in Swinburne’s poetry in consequence.

Two more of Tristram and Iseult’s interactions with winged creatures need to be mentioned. One comes as they lie asleep in the woods during their first disappearance together. As they lie there, “the dark/ Was lit with soft live gleams they might not mark,/ Fleet butterflies, each like a dead flower's ghost,/ White, blue, and sere leaf-coloured” (II.

441-4). While Tristram and Iseult's lack of knowledge of the butterflies somewhat undercuts their kinship and this is not as close a moment as Iseult and Hodain or Tristram and the sea-mew share, the butterflies do play an important part in connecting Iseult with winged creatures; she is less connected with birds than Tristram. They land on her as she sleeps, "Now on her rose-white amorous breast half bare,/ Now on her slumberous love-dishevelled hair,/ The white wings lit and vanished, and afresh/ Lit soft as snow lights on her snow-soft flesh" (II. 453-456). Since most of the butterflies are "White as the sparkle of snow-flowers in the sun/ Ere with his breath they lie at noon undone" (II. 445-446), their color echoes that of Iseult's flesh, and they cause her a joyful sensation; "she stirred/ Sleeping, and spake some tremulous bright word,/ And laughed upon some dream too sweet for truth" (II. 457-459). Yet the joy is connected closely with death, as it always is here. Iseult's sweet dream must end when she wakes; the white butterflies are like snow that will melt away in the sun, and in fact vanish before Tristram and Iseult wake up, as well as vanishing even as they dance around Iseult. Margot K. Louis reads this moving scene as one of blessing for Iseult, and connection of *her*, specifically, to animals that fly; "At one level this is one more of the scenes in which the natural world implicitly blesses and participates in the protagonists' love" ("Erotic" 654), but Louis also notes that Tristram essentially vanishes in this scene, and the butterflies alight on and touch Iseult alone ("Erotic" 655). Iseult, then, is brought more fully into the cycle of wings that began when both she and Tristram rode the winged *Swallow*. Louis discusses, too, the presence of words like "sprang" concerning the butterflies' movements ("Erotic" 654-55). While this is one of Swinburne's favorite words for describing flight in general, it also, in this poem, joins the butterflies with the sea-mew's plunge and the springing of Hodain along the trails in the woods. Iseult has wings of her

own, and flying creatures akin to her, even if she never makes the grand dive into the water that Tristram does. The butterflies appear only for this one moment in the poem, but they do their part in drawing Iseult, too, even more strongly into the endless kinship of joy and death.

Finally, a sailing ship and a water bird end *Tristram of Lyonesse* as they open it. Canto IX, “The Sailing of the *Swan*,” echoes the title of Canto I, “The Sailing of the *Swallow*,” but this time, the swan has a rather different significance. Already a water bird, it does not need to be turned into one as the figurehead of the swallow on Tristram and Iseult’s ship needs to be turned into one by mimicking a sea-mew’s motion. Rather, the *Swan* is the ship on which Tristram sends his brother-in-law and friend, Ganhardine, to fetch Iseult so he may see her one more time before he dies, with instructions to loft white sails on the return if she is with him and black ones if she is not. Iseult of Brittany lies to Tristram that the *Swan* has black sails instead of white ones—making it a different sort of swan, since variations of the bird exist in both colors—and Tristram dies as a consequence.

In fact, Canto IX draws *all* the sorts of birds mentioned in the poem—water-birds and song-birds and sea-mews—back together, but only to confirm that love itself cannot triumph over death, and Tristram and Iseult will die like the birds. Tristram, musing on the legend of the swan that sings as it dies, connects that song with his own death, since “sweet ere death, men fable, sings the swan./ So seems the Swan my signal from the sea/ To sound a song that sweetens death to me” (IX. 458-460). Tristram is no more the harper who made such sweet music that he can be compared to larks and draw Iseult’s mind from its dark musings. Now he recognizes the inevitability of his own death, although superficially he might survive his wounds—he has survived the length of Ganhardine’s journey so far, after defeating seven knights who had kidnapped a woman—and in the end he dies of a broken heart. But his death

is inevitable *before* this, when he thinks of the death of the swan. Even as he shared the sea-mew's life and vitality in Canto IV, he must now share the swan's death. One cannot share only song, joy, and power with animals, and then somehow exempt oneself from mortality. It is mortality that makes Tristram able to sing and swim blithely at all, and now he enters the sweetness of death.

The ship itself, although it in fact brings death to Tristram because Iseult of Brittany lies about what she sees, is still described with a joyous sea-mew metaphor, the last one in the poem. "And swift and steadfast as a sea-mew's wing/ [The ship] neared before the wind, as fain to bring/ Comfort, and shorten yet its narrowing track" (IX. 470-472). There is one more moment of triumph, and then Tristram dies, even as the sun rises and "high from heaven suddenly rang the lark,/ Triumphant" (IX. 464-465). Tristram's death just at the moment of dawn could be taken for a piece of pale irony, a reverse pathetic fallacy, but it is in fact more than that. It symbolizes, instead, that the world goes on and birds—specifically the larks that Tristram's music was compared to in Canto I—still sing. Tristram's death is of no more and no less notice than the lark's song, or the swan's death. To live like a bird is to die like one.

And along with the lark are gathered other echoes that resound elsewhere in the poem and join beginning and middle to end, making the poem one inescapable world of kinship. Tristram in Canto III acknowledges the sun and admits that the mere death of humans does not make it stop rising with the vocative "O sun, that when we are dead wilt rise as bright" (III. 89). And "triumphant" has appeared before in the poem both with Iseult's thought in Canto I that even bodies that triumphed over earth will ultimately lie in earth, and with the passage in which Tristram triumphs down the water-ways with his plunge away from King

Mark's knights. Here in Canto IX is the moment of sunrise when Tristram is dead, and the sun still rises as bright; here is the moment of triumph for the lark when Tristram's body will lie in earth. Death is the final master in this poem, and for joy to succeed, it *must* be. There is no immortality, because they are animals. Humans like Tristram and Iseult are more than willing to be animals and let other animals triumph at the moment of their deaths, and they are the true heroes and heroines Swinburne salutes.

So, too, are Tristram and Iseult heroes and heroines who triumph over attempts to build a permanent religious monument for them. When King Mark, grieving for their deaths and understanding for the first time that it was magic and not lust that tied them together, builds a chapel to house their bones, this burial does not last forever. As the end of the poem ignores the souls of the lovers—oddly enough, when they are buried in a chapel—so it ignores the promise of immortality often implied by an impressive monument. Tristram and Iseult share the fate of the quickly dying butterflies and singing birds that they have been compared to throughout the poem. The chapel may stand “till many a year were done” (IX. 559), but at last the sea rises and sweeps it away. If

the strong sea hath swallowed wall and tower,
And where their limbs were laid in woful hour
For many a fathom gleams and moves and moans
The tide that sweeps above their coffined bones
In the wrecked chancel by the shivered shrine:
Nor where they sleep shall moon or sunlight shine
Nor man look down for ever: none shall say,
Here once, or here, Tristram and Iseult lay:
But peace they have that none may gain who live.
And rest about them that no love can give,
And over them, while death and life shall be,
The light and sound and darkness of the sea (IX. 565-576),

then this is merely the most fitting ending for them. The “wrecked chancel” and “shivered shrine” represent the most appropriate ending for religious monuments that tried to assert

immortality, of which there is none. As *Tristram of Lyonesse* fulfills the promise of love that in so many other Swinburne poems is turned into something sterile and ruined, so it fulfills the promise of death and drowning that is sought so eagerly in other poems, only to be snatched away by the narrator's own restless consciousness or poetic immortality. Here, the end of consciousness—both that of Tristram and Iseult themselves and that of the historians who might try to “say/ Here once, or here, Tristram and Iseult lay”—is appropriate because it comes in the place that asserts mortality, after the end of life and the end of the body. The sea mimics the oblivion of the nonexistent afterlife, the same oblivion that ends “The Garden of Proserpine.” This is the “peace...that none may gain who live,” because it does not belong to the living. A natural limit is set to the endurance of the human body as well as to the endurance of the human memory.

And even the sea itself shall not endure forever, only “while death and life shall be.” This is a more powerful statement when looked at in light of Swinburne's greater corpus, where multiple poems, including “A Forsaken Garden” and “By the North Sea,” composed four and two years respectively before the bulk of *Tristram*, depict the sea as an eternal foe and eater of the land (in “A Forsaken Garden,” the sea will rise to consume the cliffs around the garden when “Death lies dead.”) Rooksby agrees that *Tristram* shows the typical Putney devotion to the sea, but that while “Both the narrator and Tristram celebrate the life of nature...Swinburne seems not so intent on pressing the theme of erosion, despite the fate of the chapel at the very end. He is closer to the ecstatic enjoyment of the natural world typified by poems like ‘A Nympholept’” (“Algernonicon” 76), the poem from which I take the title of this dissertation. Here, the death wish for both land and sea is transformed into peaceful mortality. Swinburne's narrator has achieved a state of mind in which he can look forward to

the period when both life and death shall cease, because all life on Earth is extinct, with serenity. It is not Darwin's or even the Sappho of "Anactoria's" means of coming to peace with geological time and the possibility of change in species and the human world, but it is nonetheless a way of facing these possibilities head-on, and without despair or the need for the comfort of the Christian God.

Conclusion

More openly than any other atheist or agnostic literary author in Victorian Britain, Swinburne points out the limitations of a Christian and special creationist viewpoint in relating to animals. He was not a scientist, though he admired the work of agnostic scientists like John Tyndall, whose speech to the British Association in 1874 he commented on having read "with great care and greater admiration. Science so enlarged and harmonized gives me a sense as much of rest as of light" (*Letters*, II, 554).⁴⁶ In the same letter, he talks of his method of incorporating the scientific texts he read into his verse: "Even my technical ignorance does not impair, I think, my power to see accurately and seize firmly the first thread of the great clue, because my habit of mind is not (I hope) unscientific, though my work lies in the field of art instead of science." Behind Swinburne's greatest poetry lies this "not unscientific" mindset, this power of taking the truths of common descent and recasting them in poetic form. Swinburne's desire for worship and submission, present in his relations with other authors and his sexual life, demanded a deep belief of some sort as replacement for the Christ he had disowned. However, he could not accept a substitute that was purely spiritual or that continued to place humans above the animals and plants he wrote about with

⁴⁶ The letter also outlines the connection Swinburne saw between science and disbelief: "No mythology can make its believers feel less afraid or loth to be reabsorbed into the immeasurable harmony with but the change of a single individual note in a single bar of the tune, than does the faintest perception of the lower chord touched in the whole system of things... It is Theism which to me seems to introduce an element—happily a factitious element—of doubt, discord, and disorder."

keen attention and the sea he loved.⁴⁷ Thus, the gods and goddesses he admitted lovingly into his poetry are mortal; they know death, change, and indeterminacy, three of the great realities that Darwin saw as governing the natural world. The gods Swinburne hated and set up as enemies for his poetic protagonists are immortal and try to separate themselves from change of any sort, as well as dividing the flesh and the spirit. Robert Buchanan's infamous 1871 attack on the poetry of Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, spoke the truth in its title, though Buchanan's preoccupation with the poets' sensuality missed the scientific interest behind Swinburne's thought.⁴⁸

Thought is another great component of Swinburne's poetry. On the surface, especially because he wrote such lengthy poems and because (in Housman's words) "he possessed an altogether unexampled command of rhyme," it is easy for his poetry to seem overly slick, fascinated by sound rather than sense, and meant to be read quickly or skimmed rather than struggled with. No less a critic than T. S. Eliot largely dismissed Swinburne based on this and concluded that his words were detached from their sense to the point of flourishing in a sort of world of their own. On the other hand, his use of philosophical and scientific ideas in poems like "Hertha" requires careful reading, a point that his most prominent modern critics—McGann, Louis, and Rooksby—have all made. Donald Thomas, one of Swinburne's biographers, explains that Swinburne's sounds urge speed, but his grammar demands disentangling (xvi). This is probably one of the causes of the mental exhaustion often

⁴⁷ Swinburne can be accused of writing less about specific animals and plants than a giant, indiscriminate mass of "nature." His diffuseness in description and verse is at the root of attacks by critics like T. S. Eliot, and those who followed in his wake, to the ruin of Swinburne's poetic reputation in the early twentieth century. Rooksby, among others, defends Swinburne from this charge by turning to *Tristram of Lyonesse*, with its minute descriptions of specific species. In this way, as in others, *Tristram* can be seen as the epitome of Swinburne's engagement with nature.

⁴⁸ Swinburne retorted to Buchanan's attack with *Under the Microscope*, an essay in which he mock-gravely pretends that Buchanan, and other critics of his work, are "animalcules" to be examined through his microscope in order to increase his scientific knowledge of various species, although he would rather not waste the effort.

reported, such as by McGann, after engaging with Swinburne's verse. Like Darwin, Swinburne mingles imagination and reason, though giving imagination a higher place by virtue of his work being in art instead of science, and expects an intellectual performance from his reader. His poetry is his main instrument for his investigation of the world shared by humans and animals.

And a beautiful world it is, with animals and humanity standing in kinship under the shadow of no oppressive god, contained in nature with no transcendental escape. "Beside or above me/ Nought is there to go," Hertha says. Swinburne, at least through the poetic personae that he created and sent into war with the Christian God or into brotherhood with birds, seems perfectly content that it should be so.

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