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***ROMANTIC NATURAL HISTORY: A VISION OF  
BIRTH, EVOLUTION OF LIFE-FORMS AND DEATH IN  
ENGLISH ROMANTIC POETRY***

**Keywords:** Erasmus Darwin; evolutionary ideas; romanticism; birth; death; regeneration; life-forms

**Abstract:** *The present paper surveys many works of English Romantic poets, highlighting the underlying proto-evolutionary thought. Many Romantics were acquainted with the ideas of Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's grandchild), their contemporary, and some even acknowledged his influence on them. He was not only a man of science, but a poet as well, who put into verse his evolutionary thesis. Some of his ideas recur in the romantic poems, such as the relatedness of all beings that evolved from a single living filament, the role of the aquatic environment in the birth and propagation of life, or the presence of border-like creatures indicative of mutable species. The poet is a more subtle and sensitive naturalist, conveying aesthetically the realities of nature and calling for empathy, genuine communication and harmony between all that lives. That is, scientific truth is rendered in poetic form, with the benefit of adding emotion. Emphasizing the link between science and poetry is an important endeavor in that it grants Romanticism the authority it deserves.*

The present paper is an attempt at healing the rift between science and poetry by mapping proto-evolutionary assumptions with Romantic thought. This subject has been chosen firstly because, in the author's opinion, the theory of evolution explains best and most coherently the way life started; it tells us the story of birth, death and regeneration of life-forms, which is precisely the topic of the present volume. By looking at the past and present, the theory of evolution focuses primarily on our identity; it strives to provide an answer to the all-important questions: 'Who am I? What is my connection with the human (and non-human) beings living next to me?' The publication of Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 produced a shock and was highly controversial as he himself avowed in a letter to J. D. Hooker; saying that species are not immutable felt for him like confessing a murder (Ch. Darwin). Evolutionary ideas have been making waves ever since - *On the origin of Species* was voted the most influential academic book in history, according to an online survey answered by the public (Ghose, "Darwin's 'Origin of Species'"). Charles Darwin's book surpassed big titles like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* or even the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein.

Not only is his work far from being obsolete but it is also quite relevant and the issue of creation is still up-to-date. According to a recent poll conducted by Gallup, more Americans believe in creationism than in evolutionism today. 46 %

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believe God created humans in their present form within the last 10000 years, whereas 15 % think God played no part in human evolution, which was a process that had taken millions of years (Newport, “Creationist View”). The poll further shows that the prevalence of the creationist view has not changed significantly from thirty years ago, when Gallup first asked the question. This means that many people could still reconsider their views upon reading and paying heed to Charles Darwin’s book.

Charles Darwin laid the groundwork for the modern evolutionary theory but many important evolutionary ideas were formulated during the Romantic era. Natural history faced a continual ferment throughout the eighteenth century. A vital aspect of it, as Noah Heringman highlights, was that it was highly accessible. That is, not only scholars and naturalists engaged in research, but also rural men or women, who lacked a classical education, money, social status and special equipment, practiced natural history. By gathering medicinal plants, collecting fossils for sale or showing various ‘natural wonders’ to urban tourists, they also contributed with valuable data to the progress of natural history (142-143). Furthermore, a crucial role in the advance of this field was played by colonial exploration: the voyage of Captain Cook on the ship Endeavor (1768-71) was a scientific voyage of discovery, due to which the collections of the British Museum and of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew were much enriched (Heringman 144). The development of natural history as a science is apparent in the creation of societies that focused on the study of separate branches, such as the Linnean Society (1788) or the Geological Society (1807) among others, and also in the publication of natural-history related journals like *Botanical Magazine* (1787) or *The Philosophical Magazine* (1798).<sup>1</sup>

Up to the second half of the century, the naturalist’s major preoccupation was to amass as much data as possible; they sought to classify life-forms and to present them the way they appeared at that point in time, without reference to genesis. Carolus Linnaeus’ taxonomy was an important contribution to the field and obviously had a vast influence. Yet, up to Linnaeus’ time and shortly after, natural history was rather descriptive and had a static character, it didn’t take into account the temporal dimension. In other words, as Noah Heringman put it, before 1800 natural history was not evolutionary (141), that is, it lacked a concept of deep time. But, as Hermione de Almeida notes, with the passage to the nineteenth century, an important paradigm shift occurs:

The turn of the century thus saw the replacement of the theory of preformation in evolution with a more verifiable and contingent theory of the evolutionary development and perfection of the species. Advances in biological thinking brought a new and larger sense of the word development as it applied to natural existence: life was not so much a fully created entity unrolled in time as it was an evolving complex, a natural process that was to be unfolded fully and completed over time. . . . Nature herself came to be seen as a process in time and the individual phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> The Linnean society covered the branches of botany and zoology; *The Botanical magazine*, as the title suggests, specialized in botany, whereas *The Philosophical Magazine* popularized natural history in all its branches (Heringman 151).

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at any moment, instead of being fixed and parallel shapes repeated and repeated since creation's day, were cross-sections of their own development and metamorphosis. (226)

There were many noteworthy naturalists who brought innovation in evolutionary thinking through their research. Georges Cuvier, an influential proponent of catastrophism, studied the earth strata and documented fossils; Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck wrote about the inheritance of acquired characteristics; Comte de Buffon, whose *Histoire Naturelle* was probably the most important work of natural history in eighteenth-century Europe, had an important influence on Keats; similarly, Blumenbach, whose works were read by Wordsworth and Coleridge, had a noteworthy impact.

One of the most influential naturalists who anticipated the outlines of Charles Darwin's theory was his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. Ashton Nichols states that he is "clearly the natural historian most directly responsible for many of the ideas that made their way into a wide range of Romantic literary writings" (132). Most Romantic poets were quite familiar with his ideas, not only because Erasmus Darwin was a prominent scientist of his days, but also or mainly because he had a high reputation as a poet and expressed his scientific assumptions in versified form.<sup>2</sup> Keats referred to him in his letters and was compared to Erasmus Darwin by some reviewers in terms of poetic style;<sup>3</sup> Blake was commissioned to provide illustrations for Erasmus Darwin's poems *The Loves of the Plants* and *The Economy of Vegetation* (which he did); Shelley is known to have read his works, *The Temple of Nature* among others, and, as Stuart Curran remarked, this poem that is about "the unity of human and natural spheres left a lasting stamp on Shelley's conceptions" (15); though it is true that Wordsworth criticized later Erasmus Darwin's poetic style and advocated instead spontaneity and simplicity, he himself admitted in the early 1790s: "my taste and natural tendencies were under an injurious influence from the dazzling manner of Darwin" (qtd. in King-Hele 68). Lastly, Coleridge, after having met Erasmus Darwin and exchanged ideas, expressed his admiration by saying 'Dr. Darwin possesses perhaps a greater range of knowledge than any other man in Europe' (Coleridge et al.).

There is almost no need to highlight the poets' thorough readings of Erasmus Darwin in order to justify the evolutionary thread underlying Romantic writings. Both the naturalist's and the poet's powers of observation are directed towards the vast nature; they both gaze and contemplate the major events that are part of any life-cycle. As Heringman notes, the protean inclusiveness of natural history makes it a quintessential Romantic science (143). He states: "natural history was, among other things, a major literary genre: it was both a literary and scientific

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<sup>2</sup> King-Hele actually states that in the 1790s, for a period of about five years, Erasmus Darwin "became the most highly regarded poet of the day" (26) and he quotes raving reviews of the time that praise his poetic mastery.

<sup>3</sup> See Keats' letter to Charles Cowden Clarke (in *Selected Letters of John Keats*. Edited by Grant F. Scott. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1958) and Leigh Hunt's review in *The Examiner* ("Mr. Keats' Poems & C. Continued." Rev. of "Poems", by John Keats. *The Examiner* 6 July 1817:428-429)

practice based on fieldwork. A great many authors in the Romantic period, including the Romantic poets, wrote on natural history in one form or another” (144). The difference lies in the figurative language employed by the poet, as we shall soon see.

One of the key ideas stated by the natural historian is that life started in the aquatic environment, that in the beginning the nascent earth was enveloped by the sea’s fecund waves. In his scientific poem *The Temple of Nature*, Erasmus Darwin recounts how the incipient forms of life derive their origin from this watery world:

Organic Life beneath the shoreless waves  
Was born, and nurs’d in Ocean’s pearly caves;  
First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass,  
Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;  
These, as successive generations bloom,  
New powers acquire, and larger limbs assume;  
Whence countless groups of vegetation spring,  
And breathing realms of fin, and feet, and wing. (I: 295-302)

The importance of water as a vital element is acknowledged by many Romantics. For instance, in Blake’s mythology, Tharmas, who represents the senses and whose real element is water, is called ‘Parent Power’ at the beginning of the poem *The Four Zoas*. Similarly, Urizen during his creation as a telluric entity, would say “strong I repell’d/The vast waves, & arose on the waters/A wide world of solid obstruction” (*Book of Urizen II*: 30-33). Urizen ensues from the waves both as a clod of clay (planet Earth) and as a more evolved creature, which reminds us that ontogeny reiterates phylogeny at a smaller scale. Shelley’s poem *The Cloud* is actually a celebration of the power of water to keep nature flourishing, to bring “fresh showers to the thirsting flowers” (1). Apart from indicating the cycle of water circulation, Shelley’s poem is also reminiscent of the embryo developing in the aquatic environment: “I silently laugh at my own cenotaph/And out of the caverns of rain/Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,/I arise and unbuild it again”(81-84).<sup>4</sup> This is evocative of both the cyclicity of nature and of pre-natal human development. Erasmus Darwin’s theory of spontaneous vitality demonstrates best the essential role of water in propagating and producing life. He and other naturalists discussed how organisms like vorticella, or shell-snails are kept in a dry state for ten years or longer and then can be revived as soon as they are moistened with warm water. In the same vein, in Keats’ poem *Endymion* Adonis lies dormant for months, in a dead-like state and then he is born anew to life when queen Aphrodite showers her warm tears over him. The shipwrecked lovers also lie in a dormant state until Endymion revives them by scattering mysterious fragments over their bodies. Like the microscopic animals of the naturalist, the shipwrecked lovers, being in water, do not die but retain some of their vitality until Endymion comes and provides the mysterious stimulus that turns them to life.

Another central evolutionary idea was that all creatures derived from a common ancestor, irrespective of whether they were plants, animals or humans. In

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<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this poem and its echoes of Erasmus Darwin, see King-Hele, 211.

poetic form, Erasmus Darwin referred to “the tall Oak” of the wood, “the whale” in the sea, “the lordly Lion” on land, “the eagle” in the air and the “Imperious Man, who rule[d] the bestial crowd”, saying all of them “arose from rudiments of form and sense./An embryon point or microscopic ens!” (Temple of Nature I: 303-314). This belief obviously denied the rigid hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. In scientific form, Erasmus Darwin exposed this view by rejecting the theory of pre-formation and putting forth the concept of continual development. He wrote:

It appears that all animals have a similar origin, viz. from a single living filament; and that the difference of their forms and qualities has arisen only from the different irritabilities and sensibilities, or voluntarities, or associabilities, of this original living filament...it is not impossible, but the great variety of species of animals which now tenant the earth, may have had their origin from the mixture of a few natural orders. (*Zoonomia* 210)

That is, the great variety in the vegetal and animal realm that developed gradually in time owes to the environmental conditions and to the basic needs that drove initial simple life-forms to adapt and develop into more complex structures.

These assumptions carry consequential implications for the Romantic worldview. To the Romantic poet, a common origin translates into a universal sympathy between all living things. If all creatures are related and share a common ancestry, it means they all bring their valuable contribution to the web of life. This biological interconnectedness is the gateway towards genuine communication, empathy and love - love for a fellow human being as well as for creatures that are inferior in rank. Harmony resides in unity and respect for all forms of life. The Romantic poet opens his heart with awe and reverence at the marvels of the world. He seeks communion with nature and refuge within its bosom because he knows this is the key to happiness.

This awareness is explicit in Blake’s printed illustrations. He emphasized the relatedness between natural objects rather than their distinctness. As Nichols points out, his caterpillars and butterflies have human faces, his human figures often sprout roots and branches, his birds’ tails and wigs echo flower stalks and vine, while his mythic figures often connect the human form with the botanic or the bestial; for Blake to be in Nature means to be always ‘fallen’, but that does not prevent him from suggesting a powerful connectedness that unites all living things (133). Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* preaches kindness and compassion; it reminds readers that even the smallest creature is beautiful and important: “The wanton Boy that kills the Fly/Shall feel the Spiders enmity” (33-34). To Blake, there is almost a sacred link between all living things and if the natural balance is disrupted, harmony vanishes. Similarly, in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the killing of the albatross results in the wrath of nature, which punishes the crew. The mariners expiate their guilt dying one by one, whereas the central character is won by Life-in-Death. The Mariner is forgiven as soon as he, in a moment of nocturnal contemplation realizes his sympathy for all of nature’s creatures: “He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast” (VII: 613-614). The message of the poem is that kindness saves the soul and restores the balance. King Hele shows clear verbal echoes from Erasmus Darwin’s works in this poem. In King-Hele’s

interpretation, Coleridge exposes Darwin's philosophy giving it religious wrappings - whereas the poet says we should love all God's creatures, the naturalist in effect says we should love all evolution's creatures (104). Smitten by the beauties of 'animated nature' (44) the pensive poet lying next to his love in *The Eolian Harp* experiences almost a sense of the divine as he confesses his fusion with nature: "O! the one life within us and abroad,/which meets all motion and becomes its soul" (26-27).

Having a common lineage also implies that some main organic features are shared by vegetal and animal entities alike. This kinship is extensively discussed by Erasmus Darwin, who showed that plants have sensation and volition, though in a lesser degree than animals. Similarities in terms of structure and functions are discussed at length in many of his works, such as *The Botanic Garden*, *Zoonomia* or *Phytologia*. Plants also possess organs of sense, with which they distinguish variations of heat and cold, moisture or dryness, light or darkness. Apart from that, they are also endowed with something analogous to our sense of smell or touch. *Mimosa* is a frequently cited example in the latter case. Erasmus Darwin humanizes plants as he speaks of their "passion of love", their "dreams or waking hours" and concludes that they "possess ideas . . . of the external world and of their own existence" (*Zoonomia* 46). Shelley's *Sensitive Plant*, directly inspired by Erasmus Darwin's description of *Mimosa*, has a heart full of love and desire (76-77); similarly Wordsworth, in *Lines Written in Early Spring*, asserts: "'Tis my faith that every flower/enjoys the air it breathes" (11-12). Like humans, plants are also sensitive and can feel even if they are quiet, which is why Wordsworth laments that man does not respect "Nature's holy plan" (22).

The case of *mimosa*, a sensitive plant that behaved like an animal brings into discussion other important issues. Naturalists were preoccupied with border-forms that were hard to classify because they shared vegetable and animal characteristics. Sometimes, they had difficulty setting a demarcation line between plants and animals; also, the precise limit between animals and humans was sometimes problematic (Gusdorf 560-61). Previous descriptions of Linnaeus of species as being fixed, constant, as 'like [that] always gives birth to like' (qtd. In Richards 57) were constantly contradicted by the evidence of hybrid forms and variations in nature. Though naturalists didn't fully understand the mutations they witnessed, they started doubting permanence and acknowledged that "species might not be as distinct as earlier naturalists had supposed" (Nichols 132). The early nineteenth century scholars speculated about hybridization, variations within species and the possibility of improving types through cross-breeding. Romantic natural history reflects these concerns putting forth bizarre creatures like Keats' *Lamia* (a colourful half-woman half-snake) or Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* that represents 'a new species' (89) that shows man's power in improving nature. Nothing is constant and fixed, everything is prone to transformation and metamorphosis, as Shelley's poem title *Mutability* suggests.

On the evolutionary road, species as well as individuals change continuously. Natural selection decides that some types are meant to thrive and progress, whereas others become obsolete and face extinction. Death is a natural process inscribed in any life-cycle. As Erasmus Darwin has shown in his poem, life



is about survival and all living species struggle for existence. He writes: “Air, earth and ocean, to astonish’d day/One scene of blood, one mighty tomb display/From Hunger’s arm the shafts of Death are hurl’d,/And one great Slaughter-house the warring world!” (Temple of Nature IV: 63-66). One’s death signifies another’s delight and survival. By decomposition or consumption, particles feed the environment and are reintegrated in nature, contributing thus to organic happiness. Blake’s sick rose will die and feed the worm, giving it life. The Romantic poet is at peace with the inevitable fact of life, knowing that he will be “made one with nature” (370) as Shelley’s poem *Adonais* points out. The transience of life is acknowledged in many Romantic poems, with the savvy calm of the poet-naturalist, who is aware that a new life-cycle will revive the splendors in the grass. Or as Shelley optimistically suggests in *Ode to the West Wind* – “If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (V:70). The “wither’d leaves” will “quicken a new birth” (64), ensuring the future regeneration of life-forms.

As we can see, a survey of many Romantic works indicates that scientific truth is rendered in poetic form, with the benefit of adding emotion. Literary critics have either traced direct verbal echoes of naturalists’ writings in Romantic poetry or have spoken of the poets’ subconscious appropriation of many evolutionary ideas. In *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* (1777) John Aikin pointed out that “nothing can be really beautiful which has not truth for its basis” (25) and recommended the “accurate and scientific study of nature” (32-33). It is true that some of the precision and rigor typical of the scientific inquiry is lost in the ornaments of the figurative language, but the advantage is that information has a more powerful impact upon the reader being transmitted via the emotional channel. It is never too much to talk about the link between science and literature, it is never too often to remind the common reader of Romanticism of the scientific knowledge possessed by the Romantic poets. Romantic poetry has often been under attack, being called a thing of pleasure, an aesthetic delight prone to propagating illusions. Even some of the Romantic poets fell into this fallacy, as Keats’ bewailing at the unweaved rainbow indicates. As Abrams noted in *The Mirror and the Lamp* Romanticism was often lauded mainly for its hedonistic utility (302). In order to empower Romanticism and grant it the authority it deserves, it is important to remember that, apart from being a ‘spontaneous overflow of feelings’, poetry incorporates science. Or, as Wordsworth cautioned us in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, the poet:

will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science . . . he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the object of science itself. The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the Botanist or Mineralogist will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 250)

Romantic natural history teaches us that all that lives is holy; it urges us to manifest concern and sympathy not only for our fellow-creatures who are our equals, but also for those weaker creatures like plants and animals that need our support. In an age when consumerism and technological advance prevails, providing a protective environment is crucial for the survival and prosperity of many species.

Only by striving to assist each other in our growth can we hope to continue evolving and reach our better selves.

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