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Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

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Darwin's Contemplative Vision

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE

The Darwin fish has become a potent and provocative symbol of the tensions and cross-currents in contemporary discourse about evolution, creationism, and intelligent design. Usually displayed as a bumper sticker or a small silver icon, it plays on the meaning of the ancient Christian Icthus symbol by placing Darwin's name in the body of the fish. As with all such symbols, its meaning defies easy explanation. However, it is not difficult to discern at least one of its meanings: evolution trumps creation. In other words, there is a different and more compelling explanation of how life came into being than the one offered by the belief system underlying the traditional Icthus. (Tom Lessl at the University of Georgia, who has done an extensive survey of those who display this symbol on their cars, argues that such display often amounts to an "act of ritual aggression"). Nor, in the bitter and divisive climate of today's debates about evolution and creation, is it possible any longer to look innocently upon the Icthus symbol itself. It has now come to stand as the ultimate 'anti-Darwin' icon, a rebuke of atheistic, evolutionary thought. The power of these symbols owes much to the stridency with which the ideas of both evolution and creation are promoted by their respective supporters. The entire issue, at least within contemporary political-cultural debate, has become utterly polarized: one is either for God or for evolution (and Darwin).

One may object that such polarizing discourse is clearly oversimplified and that there is much evidence in contemporary thought of more subtle formulations of the question. Still, the common perception of Darwin—embraced both by scientists for whom Darwin's understanding of evolution is nearly indisputable and by those Christian believers for whom Darwin's ideas represent a threat to a theistic worldview—is that he saw the natural world as bereft of spirit. The challenge of rethinking these perceptions, in this bicentenary year of Darwin's birth, is immense, not least because we must do so through the filter of our own increasingly hardened cultural and religious assumptions. Yet Lynda Lynn Haupt's remarkable and beautiful book argues that we ought to try to do so, not only as a way of honoring Darwin's own complex and intricate way of seeing the world, but in order to deepen our own capacity for seeing it.¹

Haupt approaches her task not by examining *The Origin of Species* and its hugely influential legacy, but instead by focusing her attention on Darwin's

little known *Ornithological Notes*, based on a notebook he kept during his five year voyage on the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836, but only published eighty years after Darwin's death in the *Bulletin of the British Museum*. Her reasons for doing so are worth considering, especially for anyone interested in comprehending how subtle but significant shifts in self-understanding unfold within human consciousness. In Darwin's case, this means seeking a better understanding of how he grew as a naturalist during his years on the *Beagle*, and how his capacity to see and feel and interpret the natural world deepened and matured. Haupt believes that the only way to gain a real sense of this is to step back from Darwin's more famous and fully realized works, whose power derives in no small part from the maturity of his theoretical vision, and examine instead the notebook that bears witness to his gradual, incremental shifts in understanding and awareness. For this reason, Haupt eschews using even Darwin's *Journal of Researches*, which he put together two years after his return to London, or the bird volume of the *Zoology of the Beagle*. In these and other works prepared for publication, we find, says Haupt, "the polished results of his ornithological study and contemplation." But in the *Notes*, she argues, "we find the study and contemplation themselves, and they are wonderful—quirky, zealous, irreverent, and humble" (11). This distinction is crucial to everything that follows. While Haupt acknowledges the lasting significance of Darwin's more celebrated works, she makes a compelling case for looking more closely at the relatively raw, unfiltered *Notes*.

The *Notes*, she argues, "reveal not only the seeds of Darwin's thoughts on evolution but also his deep sensitivity regarding the behavior and ecological study of animals in their natural, wild places." They reveal, in other words, how Darwin learned to "watch, how to think, how to twine beauty with science, and objectivity with empathy" (11–12). These are qualities of mind and habits of being he did not possess when he embarked on the *Beagle*. He had to learn them, practice them, grow into them. Which he did, to an astonishing degree. It is this growth and evolution of Darwin's own awareness of the world that Haupt finds most striking and which leads her to make one of the boldest claims of her book: "Over time [Darwin] grew as a watcher of birds, and he was elevated in mind, in imagination, and—this is a word rarely used in connection with Darwin, but I will argue for it strongly—in spirit" (14). One almost never hears talk of Darwin's spirituality, or of his spiritual vision. This is in no small measure due, I would suggest, to the limitations we place on such language. If describing Darwin's vision of the world as spiritual requires us to locate him firmly within a recognized historical, creedal expression of faith, such as that which he grew up under as a member of the Church of England, we may well have to disavow any such language in speaking of Darwin's view of the natural world. But if we mean by such language, what Haupt does when

she speaks of Darwin's slow "conversion to a particular way of seeing—a biological vision that is relentless, patient and steeped in a naturalist's faith that small things matter," then we may be compelled to reconsider both Darwin's view of the world and our understanding of spirituality.

This is in fact one of the great virtues of this book. Through the author's careful, patient attention to Darwin's growth as a naturalist, she helps us to see and feel Darwin's way of engaging the world for what it was: a kind of contemplative awareness. "His manner of deep watchfulness," suggests Haupt, "allows the ordinary ground of life to become sanctified, to be brought into *sensus plenior*—a "fuller sense"—through the offering of simply attention" (15–16). This view of Darwin as a contemplative naturalist, someone whose careful attention to the natural world helped him to perceive its sacred character, stands in stark contrast to the view of his work that one most often encounters in contemporary discourse. Thinkers such as Richard Dawkins (sometimes referred to as "Darwin's Rottweiler") have drawn upon Darwin's ideas to mount an aggressive attack against the very possibility of spirit or transcendence (natural selection being understood as an entire world-view, brooking no rivals, not simply a way of understanding how organisms in the natural world change and evolve). Indeed, as Darwin's fish and the contentious debates over evolution and intelligent design suggest, we have become habituated to thinking of Darwin as someone for whom the natural world is entirely bereft of spirit.

Haupt helps us to look at Darwin's thought in a more subtle and complex way, and invites us to consider how Darwin, as a young man, learned to see the natural world. She does so largely by focusing her attention on the way Darwin's feeling for the natural world developed during his voyage on the *Beagle*, and how he developed as a writer, a thinker, a person. She invites the reader to refrain from moving too rapidly through Darwin's earlier work towards the part of his work that has had the greatest lasting impact: his theory of natural selection. Similarly, she suggests, we should be wary of giving too much credence to Darwin's initial way of framing reality, which owed much to the influence of the great naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt. Paying close attention to the *Ornithological Notebooks*, Haupt argues, allows us to witness Darwin "writing through the imposed transcendence of Humboldt's influence to the more honest, personal transcendence located in the true, everyday things of the earth" (49). Here, she suggests, we encounter not simply the seeds of Darwin's later theories, but more importantly the very font of Darwin's creativity as a naturalist. We learn to appreciate what she refers to as "the beauty of that which is still being formed" (50).

Haupt is referring here to a still-being-formed *awareness*, in particular the delicate, mysterious process by which Darwin became attentive to the life-forms around him and to the meaning of his own relationship with these life-

forms. His early descriptions of bird-life in Brazil reveal an awareness that had hardly begun to take form. Moving through an ecosystem with what is widely acknowledged to possess the highest avian diversity on the planet, Darwin noted: “I was surprised at the scarceness of birds” (57). His eyes and ears were not yet attuned to this particular place, to the subtle movement of life-forms in the rainforest. And when he does see birds, his ability to describe them is severely limited (Haupt notes how often Darwin uses the word “beautiful” to describe the birds he sees, an adjective that she suggests is roughly analogous to describing a person as “nice”). But within a year, Darwin’s notebook came to be “filled with detail, morphological and behavioral secrets grasped through persistent, patient observation” (59). He was beginning to learn how to pay attention and in paying attention to feel himself drawn into the world he observed. It is in this kindling of relationship, Haupt suggests, that we can best appreciate Darwin’s emerging spiritual vision.

There is a telling moment early on in Darwin’s time in Brazil when one senses something begin to shift within him. He is still learning to know the place, and his ability to see and feel what is around him is not yet mature. And yet, Haupt claims, he is *open* to the life of the place. On February 29th, 1832, he wrote: “I have been wandering by myself in a Brazilian forest.” Haupt notes the importance of three simple words: wandering, myself, forest. Here and elsewhere in the *Notebooks*, she says, one can see evidence of Darwin’s increasing ability to “calm himself, to see into things on his own. The elegance of grasses, he noted quietly, the subtle gloss of foliage, the shocking stature of the palms, and that strange forest paradox—that sound and silence can, in fact in wilderness *must* wend about each other.” He was beginning to cultivate an awareness of what simple, careful attention could yield. Darwin observed: “Within the recesses of the forest when in the midst of it a universal stillness appears to reign” (61).

It is not easy to determine how the development of this capacity for contemplative awareness of the natural world contributed to Darwin’s eventual formulation of the theory of natural selection. Haupt makes a persuasive case that Darwin’s growing sense of *engagement* with and *participation* in the natural world was crucial to his ability to discern the intricate patterns and relationships that he later wove into his theory of natural selection. But she invites readers to attend in the first instance to what she boldly refers to as Darwin’s “conversion”—from student to pilgrim—not simply as a way of explaining how his great theory came into being, but primarily as a way of posing questions about the human capacity for intimacy with the natural world. In her account, this is among the most important legacies of Darwin’s pilgrimage in South America: he helped to remind us of the deep and intimate relationship that is possible between human beings and other living beings in the natural world.

Haupt points to Darwin's time in Maldonado, southern Uruguay, in April 1833, as an important turning point. It was a year and a half into his journey, a moment when his long, steady practice of carefully attending to birds in the wild began to yield new insight and appreciation, as well as a heightened sense of intimacy with the birds of this region. His attention to the Chucaco Tapacolo, a shy forest species not at all easy to see, reveals his changing sensibility. They are small birds, and as Haupt notes, "to observe them closely, Darwin made himself small, and quiet, and patient." He comments in his notebook: "This bird frequents the most gloomy & retired spots in the humid forests. . . and at some times, although its cry may be heard, it cannot with the greatest attention be seen; but generally by standing motionless, in the wood, it will approach within a few feet, in the most familiar manner." It is a simple description of an encounter with a small, elusive bird. Compared with Darwin's later, momentous encounters with finches on the Galapagos Islands, this sighting hardly seems worth mentioning. Yet, Haupt suggests that the note of familiarity that Darwin sounds here was gradually becoming "the center of [his] natural insight." The "simple warmth," toward his subjects, the "quiet intimacy" of his encounters with birds is noticeable and striking. So is Darwin's growing capacity for patience and stillness in the presence of other living beings. This sense of Darwin's deepening capacity to see and feel the life of the world around him is, for Haupt, one of the most significant elements to emerge from his *Ornithological Notebooks*. "Here, in patience, in stillness," she notes of Darwin's approach, "the birds show themselves and tell their secrets. Their stories are not shaken out of them beneath a microscope but revealed, animal to animal, with a kind of earthen *familiarity*, on the forest soil" (86).

It is analysis of Darwin's growing attention to this mysterious, complex reality, his deepening habit of "expectant familiarity" as he observed the lives and habits of animals, that occupies much of the remainder of the book; also how his growing sense of what Nora Barlow has called "sympathetic participation" in the lives of these animals transformed his thinking about the natural world; and what happened to Darwin himself in the process. Haupt comments on Darwin's boldness in inquiring into animal consciousness, something that would later bring him under suspicion of engaging in a kind of anthropomorphism. But Haupt questions whether he is really guilty of this, and suggests instead that Darwin was beginning to imagine the world with an intimacy and humility and creativity that took him far beyond anything most of his contemporaries at that time had begun to conceive of. "In his observations of seals and birds and other animals, in his often playful musings about their thoughts and behaviors, Darwin utterly, and even joyfully, abandoned his privileged human status. He threw his own thoughts and behaviors right into the animal mix, putting all creatures, including humans, on the same continuum

of consciousness. Rather than imposing human consciousness upon animal behaviors, he animalized consciousness in general.” And in so doing, something began to change in him. As Haupt puts it: “he embraced a new kind of humility—a radical humility that made him strangely slender, able to peer into the wilderness through doors only slightly ajar, to see, in a new and small and gracious way, the movement of life” (126).

This is beautiful but strange image, especially when applied to a naturalist whose work would ultimately produce such a *large*, even dominating presence in the scientific community. Yet, if Haupt is to be believed, Darwin’s thinking about the natural world, and about the evolution of species in particular, depended, crucially, on his increasingly refined capacity to disappear, to enter quietly into the intimate and hidden lives of the animals in whose presence he moved daily. In this, she offers an important lesson to anyone who would seek to understand how experience and thought inform one another. In Darwin’s case, she claims: “It was not theorizing about the natural world that led to a vision of ecological wholeness but the reverse. His sensibility, his unforced awareness of biological interrelatedness would inform his life’s thought” (159). His *experience* of noticing and feeling the life of the world around him, of learning to make ever more subtle distinctions in the behavior and appearance and even thought of animals, his sense of the sheer richness and complexity of the ecological reality within which he found himself moving—*this* was the ground out of which his thinking and his increasingly bold theorizing about natural world emerged. It becomes difficult, when viewed in this way, to distinguish sharply between Darwin’s felt experience of the world as vibrant and beautiful and his growing awareness of the underlying pattern by which it could best be understood.

This intuition about Darwin’s shifting sensibilities, gleaned from a careful reading of the *Ornithological Notebooks*, leads Haupt to an unconventional but fascinating insight regarding Darwin’s time on the Galapagos Islands, a time that many have pointed to as crucial to his development of the theory of natural selection. It was not until many years later that Darwin himself made the conceptual leaps that enabled him to articulate his mature theoretical thinking on this subject. But here on the Galapagos Islands, Haupt notes, Darwin “experienced his most radical intimacy with wild beings. . . a closeness to animals that surpassed anything he had yet known” (186). Could this experience have shaped Darwin’s later thinking about evolution? It is impossible to say for certain. But Haupt invites us to consider how the patterns emerging in Darwin’s felt sense of the world, especially his sense of “wild intimacy” with the living beings among whom he moved, may have contributed to his understanding about the relationships within and among species. For Darwin’s mature vision would eventually reveal “a natural order that refuses to mark

humans as separate or exceptional or beyond the reach of wildness” (187). Indeed this vision depended for its coherence on a sense of the profound human participation in, and intimacy with the natural order. Haupt’s careful attention to Darwin’s emerging practice and sensibility as a naturalist helps us consider anew how his actual experience of intimacy within the natural world may have helped him see the natural world as a place of endless intimacy among and between species.

Is this a “spiritual vision” of the world? Or is it a vision of reality that has, as many have argued, emptied the world of spirit? Even to pose the questions this way is to risk falling prey to an overly simple, schematized way of seeing things. But they are important questions nonetheless, and continue to haunt our current thinking about the character of the world we inhabit. Haupt, to her credit, makes no attempt to “baptize” Darwin posthumously, or make of him crypto-creationist capable of being seen and accepted in our current, fractious debates as a kind of believer. But neither is she prepared to accept the often-simplistic view of Darwin as the father of biological materialism. What she does instead is, to my mind, both more interesting and more profound. She invites us to consider what it might mean to think of Charles Darwin as a contemplative. So too does she invite us to stand with Darwin and look out on to the world with him, to listen to the way he described what he saw and to ask ourselves what sort of world it is that emerges. “Immense and wonderful” is how Darwin described the wild life of the world around him (244). Or, as he articulated his sense of things in the *Origin of Species*: “When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled” (245). Here is Darwin describing how the world looks to him through the lens of his mature theory of natural selection. Thanks to Haupt’s careful assessment of Darwin’s development as a naturalist, it becomes possible to view this understanding of the world as being entirely consistent with, even arising from his long, patient practice of contemplative attention to the natural world. It becomes possible, in other words, to view Charles Darwin as having been not simply a scientist of extraordinary originality and theoretical range, but also an uncommonly perceptive contemplative. Darwin’s little-known *Ornithological Notes* reveal how he arrived at this brilliant, integrated vision of the world; but it is Lyanda Lynn Haupt’s sensitive and perceptive reading of this work that enables us to see and appreciate it.

NOTE

1. Lyanda Lynn Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent: The Importance of Everything and Other Lessons from Darwin’s Lost Notebooks*. (New York: Little Brown, 2006).