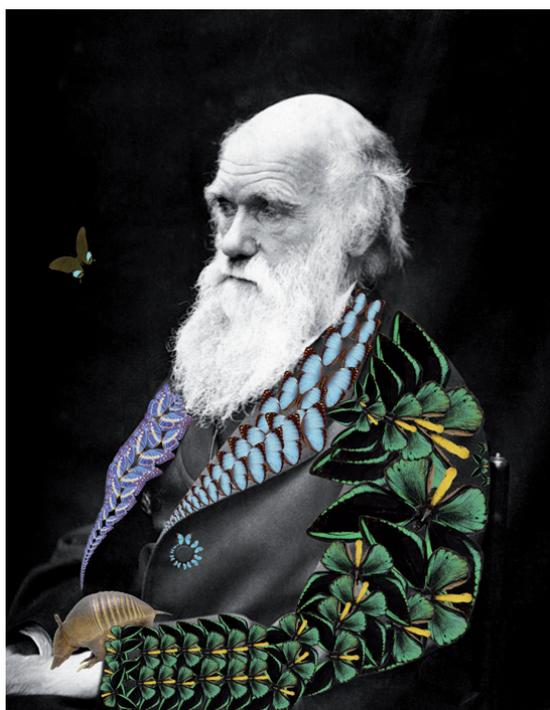


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Darwin, Evolution, Evolutionisms

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LITERATURE AND DARWINISM: AN INCURSION IN PORTUGUESE NOVELS FROM THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

It has become common to consider *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, a scientific and cultural revolution. With this controversial work, Darwin gave Science a new paradigm, which allowed natural history to be rewritten. From the cultural point of view one sees a rupture with the romantic ideal of harmony between Man and Nature, since the principle which regulates life is no longer harmony but struggle and resistance. The anthropocentric conception of the world also suffered a correlative disturbance, especially after the publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871. Mankind lost its central status in Nature, simply becoming an element of the zoological order, a descendent of superior mammals. At the same time, admitting the assumption that biological life did not come from nothing, complete and almost perfect as we know it, the Darwinian theory shook the foundations of the Divine Creation doctrine, which fed the Western World's vision during centuries. The idea of a programmed world for the welfare of humanity loses support when facing a Nature that acts in an autonomous manner, defining its own course aside from human design.

No sector of culture would be able to ignore such a profound provocation. Attentive and worshipping the science of its time, literature could not keep astray from this phenomenon: it contributed to popularize the theory, eventhough questioning it. I will now illustrate some aspects of the literary reception of Darwinism in the last quarter of the 19th century, summing up a previous reflexion¹.

Natural selection, sexual selection

As is generally known, the impact of the Darwinian theory outside of the academic environment was not immediate. In most European countries it was only after the 1870's that it became widespread among the general public and was discussed in the newspapers and magazines. Portugal also had keen enthusiasts, as proved by the important study of Ana Leonor Pereira², although the first Portuguese translations

¹ Maria Helena SANTANA, *Ciência e Literatura na Ficção do século XIX*, Lisboa, INCM, 2007, pp. 46-54 and 237-265.

² Pereira, Ana Leonor – *Darwin em Portugal (1865-1914)*, Coimbra, Almedina, 2001, pp. 66-85.

appeared rather late. In the 1880's the readers were sufficiently familiarised with the principles of natural selection and the struggle for life; originally scientific concepts, they had now turned into cultural stereotypes.

The theme of the "struggle for life" was, without a doubt, the most productive within the writers of this period, which often used the expression as a metaphor for social violence. Hardly any writer frees himself/herself from who does not use this "magic formula"³ to act out the dramatic conflicts, through characters who are described, invariably, as strong and weak, winners and losers. Teixeira de Queirós, one of the pioneers of Portuguese naturalism, defines the modern novel as a study of the "great conflict of life", this is, the human reaction to natural forces which oppress (the environment, the will, the body); and says that in this struggle, the individual, being weaker, is almost always defeated⁴. The same conception appears in some of the most influential writers of this period. It is the case of Thomas Hardy or Zola, for example, who represent the relationships between individuals and classes under the sign of rivalry and "predation"⁵.

Effectively, one of the senses emerging from Darwinian narrative is precisely a blind and voracious Nature, eliminating the less suitable in its triumphant march; and not even Darwin's awed gaze regarding fecundity and perfection conceals a natural history marked by violence. On the other hand, so-called social Darwinism came to legitimate readings in the opposite direction: if some agreed that the principle of the survival of the fittest predicted a society more free and evolved (as the positivists believed⁶), others saw the opposite, selfishness and competition aggravating social conflict. In this perspective, the "struggle for life" acts as a metaphor of the capitalist society.

In more pessimistic writers, the Darwinian world was translated effectively as predation – "the horror of a universal struggle in the midst of universal blindness", as Antero de Quental would say. Fialho de Almeida faces civilization's advance as a new form of barbarism, bringing the intrinsic bestiality of the human being to surface:

Everywhere the aquaphobia of profit: modern life incompatible with ancient honesty: and in the hunt for gold, the strongest hunter was almost always the guiltiest. And in the complete carnage of that struggle of wild animals and beasts, which is life, João da Graça saw, crawling in the shadows, the ant colony of the sad, the helpless,

³ "Comme la *synthèse des contraires*, qui a fait fureur, notamment en histoire, la *sélection du plus apte* est une de ces formules magiques qui ont le don d'obséder les esprits où elles sont entrées. (...) Les romanciers qui ont le plus à se louer de la bienveillance du public ne nous parlent que des *batailles de la vie*;" Gabriel TARDE, "Darwinisme naturel et darwinisme social", in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, vol. XVII, 1884, p. 607.

⁴ Prologue to *Os Noivos (Comédia Burguesa)*, Nova edição, Lisboa, Parc. A.M.Pereira, 1896. All translations mine.

⁵ Cf. George LEVINE, "By Knowledge Possessed: Darwin, Nature, and Victorian Narrative", in *New Literary History*, 24, 1993, pp. 363-91. Gillian BEER, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, London, Ark Paperbacks, 1985; Robert J. NIESS, "Zola et le capitalisme: le darwinisme social", in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 54, 1980, pp. 57-67.

⁶ Cf Fernando CATROGA, *A Militância Laica e a Descristianização da Morte em Portugal (1865-1911)*, Coimbra, Univ. Coimbra, 1988, p. 262).

the beaten children with no fathers, men without work, women without the right husband, families without shelter, [...] a sort of zoological fatality, unbreakable ...⁷.

This issue was also debated by two scientists in the pages of *A Caridade em Lisboa* (Charity in Lisbon), of Teixeira de Queirós. Manuel de Sá, a skeptical radical, sees in the spectacle of life in society a total absence of justice and rationality; thus developing fantasies of mass destruction, and even proposing general sterilization. Julião, a Bacteriologist, has a different perspective on this matter, coming from what he observes in test tubes:

The inequality among living beings is a natural fact. This principle is spread all over the universe: for some to live it is necessary that others die; the weak are perpetually devoured by the strong, by those that have the impulse to attack and better defend themselves in resistance ⁸.

The selection of the fittest articulates along with another theme which also had great repercussion in nineteenth-century novels: sexual selection. According to Darwinian theory, the evolution of species determines the choice of sexual partner; it is so in the animal world and so should it be in the human world. In the end, as Schopenhauer taught us, love is no more than a pretext: in Nature all is summed or should be summed up in an instinctive orientation under the disguise of procreation; i.e., the perfecting of the species is the unconscious factor of social attraction. This idea is made clear in *O Crime do Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro), of Eça de Queirós. Dr. Gouveia, a positivist, explains to the unhappy boyfriend his situation under the light of the selection of the fittest: “I see what it is. You and the priest, he says, both want the girl. As he is the smartest and most decided, he got her. It is natural law: the strongest steals, eliminates the weakest; the female and the prey belong to him”⁹. In another novel of the time, the main character invokes the same argument to justify adultery with a married woman: “Nature does not know fidelity and infidelity; beings are attracted by natural selection, there was no escape from this law”¹⁰. Later on, he would recognize it as a fallacy and would reject the materialistic science which inspired him.

The human problem that these characters portray is the conflict (or even contradiction) between natural law and social order. Society generated its own codes and does not allow Nature to function freely. In his book *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*, Darwin reflects on various factors which intervene in the process of human sexual selection. On the one hand, he refers to the choice of more attractive pairs, noticing that such criteria do not always relate to higher biological success. On the other hand, he highlights that civilisation introduces perverse elements – of course, the incidence of choice, predominantly male, but also the criteria by which it

⁷ Fialho de ALMEIDA, “Três Cadáveres”, in *O País das Uvas*, Lisboa, Livr. Clássica Editora, 12th edition, 1982, p. 288.

⁸ Teixeira de QUEIRÓS, *A Caridade em Lisboa*, Lisboa, Parc. A.M.Pereira, 1901, p. 160.

⁹ Eça de QUEIRÓS, *O Crime do Padre Amaro*, critical edition, Lisboa, INCM, 2000, pp. 581.

¹⁰ Jaime de Magalhães LIMA, *Transviado*, Lisboa, Empresa Editora, 1899, p. 65.

governs itself: wealth, social position and intellectual attributes (“mental charms” in women, “intellectual powers and energy” in men).

Let us return to literature. In *A paixão de Maria do Céu* (The passion of Maria do Céu), of Carlos Malheiro Dias, the theory of sexual selection embodies very curious aspects, since it is allegorised in the content of the text. It is called “Romantic Novel”, due to being projected in the historical scenery of the French invasions. In summary, it is about a fatal passion of a young aristocrat girl who was seduced by an official of the Napoleonic army, ending up abandoned to a miserable existence. The main theme of the text regards the loss of national sentiment, caused by the chaos which followed the royal family’s escape and the Portuguese befriending the invader. Thus, in the novel, a Darwinian sociological thesis is drawn: social disorder stimulates vital competition; sexual selection is done on the basis of instinct, without considering reason or virtue: “Everywhere women are selective such as animals; her appetite imperious as tyranny” – adds the narrator. The decadence of the people of Lisbon is easily explained through the physical and psychological strength of the invaders:

The woman avenged the impoverished generations, exhausted, not virile due to the Inquisition and the praying, broken into grotesque corsets, coward noblemen and fraternity brothers. The Portuguese women were delirious with the French as the Romans had been delirious with the Sabines, falling anxious and breathless in the white and strong chest of those fighting and preying adventurers, robust animals of devastation and of harassment...¹¹.

What is really at stake is the dissolution of traditions, the pernicious contact between two races with different “natural histories”: one sentimental and devout; the other daughter of the Revolution, used to violence. In the turbulent 18th century Lisbon something similar happened to what had occurred in the Roman Empire: an “epidemic of heroism”, followed by moral decadence.

Evolution / regression

At the end of the book *The Descent of Man*, Darwin stated that the human being could be proud of civilization, but could not forget his origins: “He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins”. The simian origin of man was, undoubtedly, the most thrilling and controversial theme of Darwinian theory. Among the most interesting literary texts are those dedicated to reconstructing the birth of human beings – the *homo sapiens*, as we would say today – which comes to substitute Adam and Eve in the Bible.

In 1880 an important book, *Elementos de Antropologia* (Elements of Anthropology), was published in Portugal. The author, Oliveira Martins, proposes to “translate the

¹¹ Carlos Malheiro DIAS, *A Paixão de Maria do Céu. Novela Romântica*. Lisboa, Livr. Editora Tavares, Cardoso e Irmão, 1902, p. 243-4.

myths in the positive language of science”, this is, he offers to rewrite the Book of Genesis according to Darwinian theory. Due to the lack of documentary elements, the author uses his imagination to reconstruct the past: The story of Caliban¹², the first man, is actually more of a literary than a scientific construction. We accompany his development through a succession of episodes, scenarios and pitoresque details, as in a novel: the discovery of the body, the weapons... the discovery of speech, art, love. Evolution is complete at the moment in which Caliban reaches social consciousness (“the last of the acts of creation – humanity”).

Eça de Queirós was inspired by this book to write one of his most beautiful short-stories: “Adão e Eva no Paraíso” (Adam and Eve in Paradise). This text, published in 1897 is a philosophical narrative of a humorous tone. The irony of the text results in the mixture between the biblical allegory and post-darwinian narrative of the origins: the first man is called Adam, but no longer lives in Eden: born in an imperfect Earth, populated by dangers – the terrible fauna of the Tertiary Period.

Adam, the Father of Men, was created on the 28th of October, at two in the afternoon...¹³.

In those times, my friends, the Sun still rotated around the Earth (...). So, in a thick and dark forest, a certain being, slowly releasing its grasp from the branch of a tree where he had been perched during that centuries long morning (...) on his two feet, steadied himself with strenuous energy, stood, spread his free arms, took a vigorous step, felt the difference from his animality and conceived the fascinated thought of what he *was*, and what he truly *had been!* God, who had supported him, in that moment created him ¹⁴.

Adam’s first steps, thoughts and terrors certainly come from the book of Oliveira Martins, as well as various other previous episodes, where “the abominable days of Paradise” are told. The two authors also converge in the representation of love which, according to Oliveira Martins, constitutes the beginning of man’s socialisation. Eça acts out the biblical episode in the same way, interpreting it in favour of Eve: “It is Eve who cements and breaks the big angular rocks of the construction of humanity.”

In the final part of the novel, Eça refuses scientific sources to build, in an entire creative freedom, the tender moments of the original family. Yet, once again, the two texts coincide with each other when the narrator questions the sense of the story (or of History). When Martins describes the orangutan ancestor, he questions the sadness in his eyes “by chance – who knows? – predicting the infinite misery reserved for his descendance...”¹⁵. Eça’s text develops this suggestion as well. Maintaining the ironic discourse, it contrasts the happy life of the orangutan with the suffering of Mankind,

¹² The name comes from a character of Shakespeares, a “savage” in a remote island in the play *The Tempest*.

¹³ Eça de QUEIRÓS, “Adão e Eva no Paraíso”, *Contos*, Lisboa, Livros do Brasil, s.d. (In fact, there was an Anglican bishop in the 17th Century, James Usher, which fixed the date of creation of the world as the 23rd of October of the year 4004 a.C.).

¹⁴ Eça de QUEIRÓS, *Contos*, Lisboa, Livros do Brasil, s.d., p. 122.

¹⁵ Oliveira MARTINS, *Elementos de Antropologia*, 5ª ed., Lisboa, Guimarães Editores, 1987, p. 65.

condemned to have a soul. Unaware of the problems of conscience, the orangutan lives in the peace of God:

He returns to his tree early and lying in the leafy net, slowly abandons himself in the pleasure of dreaming, in an awakened dream, similar to our metaphysics and our epics but [...] a dream all made of certainty. [...] This is how the orangutan spent his day, in the trees. And how did man, the cousin of the orangutan, spend his day in the cities? Suffering – for having the superior gifts that the orangutan lacks! Suffering – for dragging with himself, unrecoverably, that incurable evil which is his soul! Suffering – because our Father Adam, did not dare to declare in reverence to the Lord: “Thank you, oh sweet Creator, give the Earth governance to whom you better choose, to the elephant or the kangaroo, while I, knowing better, return to my tree!...¹⁶.

Fialho de Almeida explores the same theme (paradise lost), in the novel “A Dor” (The Pain)¹⁷. The text takes the form of a dialogue between God and the first man, highlighting the consequences of the transformist theory. Questioned on the differences which separate the human being from the orangutan (his immediate ascendant), God answers with a comparative anatomy lecture: facing open skulls of the father and grandson, He explains the map of cerebral circumvolutions; locates the humps of instinct and intellect; guarantees the transmission of intelligence and of “patrimony of ideas”. The moral of the fable is that God gave man reasons to feel privileged amongst the beings of Creation but also gave him the inherent suffering of his condition; the weight of having a conscience is the poisoned gift of evolution: “And since then that vain animal, judged as the most perfect and the most free of living beings, became the miserable slave who, for all eternity, screams under the whip of his tyrant – the tyrant called Thought”.

I end this incursion with a brief reference to atavism – the dark side of Darwinist anthropology. The principle that evolution is processed in a gradual but not simultaneous way had awakened the interest of the anthropologists in the so-called wild or primitive communities, where it would be possible to observe the previous stages of development¹⁸. Certain primitive tribes seemed to demonstrate this phenomenon, maintaining themselves immobilised in ancestral forms.

Fialho de Almeida was interested in this issue. In several of his rustic tales, the characters find themselves at the limit of differentiation between man and animal; they are not “wild” in the usual sense of the term but represent forms of rudimentary existence. Domingas, a shepherdess in “Idílio Triste” (Sad Idyll), had always lived in a rustic environment, in almost complete isolation; she could hardly speak and her gestures had a marked animalistic mimetism. One day she met a man and became pregnant without knowing; obeying an unconscious impulse, the girl prepared

¹⁶ ID., *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁷ Fialho de ALMEIDA, “A Dor”, *Contos*, Lisboa, Livr. Clássica Editora, new edition, s.d. pp. 315-20 (1st edition 1881).

¹⁸ Darwin, in *The Descent of Man*, refers to impressive testimonies on wild tribes, out of his own experience and the abundant bibliography in this area; a German researcher, quoted by L. Büchner, affirmed inclusively having recognized in Abyssinia a race of black people with tales!

a shelter filled with animal skins, "...as a wild rabbit, preparing the burrow for her babies"¹⁹. In the tale "Os Pobres" (The Poor) a similar story is told, of a wretch who society excludes, transforming him in a typical case of reversion: his body acquired the aspect of a "domesticated orangutan" due to hard work and total abandonment. One night he encounters a vagabond in his cabin; the two make love in a wild orgy, and separate, without interest or memory, like animals²⁰.

Literature contributed in this way to produce living documents of Paleontology. These marginalised or handicapped beings are for naturalists a sort of fossil from the ancient days of human evolution²¹. At a time in which many scientists questioned the possibility of a return or involution, the doubt was pertinent: if there were evidence of reversion in the zoological world, why shouldn't the same principle apply to humans?

The literary texts analysed so far display anxiety and nostalgia. Nostalgia of the ancient divine Nature, lost forever in the books of poetry; anxiety facing the revelation of the new narrative on the origins, where the elected species, forgotten by God, finds it difficult to recognise itself. By transforming Adam and Eve of the fable into the "furry troglodytes" of science, Darwin disillusioned the world, evicting the King of Creation from his kingdom. Apparently there was another Story of Life, a story without a moral, without predestined heroes and perhaps without a *happy ending* – a story which was starting to be written.

¹⁹ Fialho de ALMEIDA, "Idílio Triste", in *O País das Uvas*, Lisboa, Clássica Editora, 12th edition, 1982, pp.183 ss.

²⁰ ID., *Ibid.*, pp. 67 ss. (1st edition 1893).

²¹ Oliveira Martins, in the Introduction of *Elementos de Antropologia*, states categorically: "For the anthropologist they are of the same worth, this is, as documents of a remote age, the human monsters and the collective monsters – deaf-mute, the cretins, the microcefalus – and the wild societies."