

*Dominika Oramus*  
University of Warsaw

**DARWINIAN OBSESSIONS: REFERENCES TO THE THEORY  
OF EVOLUTION IN THE NOVELS OF JOHN FOWLES, A.S. BYATT,  
AND HILARY MANTEL**

**Abstract**

This paper challenges the critical cliché that in recent fiction Darwinism replaces religion and that the scientific worldview is always in opposition to Christian belief. A close reading of three British novels written between the late 1960s and the early 1990s – namely, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, A.S. Byatt’s *Morpho Eugenia* (a short novel published together with her other novelette *Conjugal Angel* in the volume entitled *Angels and Insects*), and Hilary Mantel’s *A Change of Climate* demonstrates how Darwinian references themselves evolve over time. Three aspects of the novels are juxtaposed: primarily, the way they depict natural history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – Darwin and his fellow naturalists – and thus create the myth of how modern science was born in Victorian England. Secondly, the paper establishes what the novelists in question understand by the word ‘science’ and whether for them natural science is or is not science proper. Thirdly and lastly, what is the novelists’ attitude to the alleged conflict between Christian belief and the theory of evolution. In the quarter century dividing Fowles’s novel from Mantel’s much changes in the way each of these problems is handled.

In the essay “The New Body of Writing: Darwin and Recent British Fiction” A.S. Byatt claims that in the 1970s and 80s there is an “almost obsessive recurrence of Darwin” (Byatt *New Writing*, 443) in the British novel. Her examples include Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10 and 1/2 Chapters*, along

with a number of other books. Byatt connects this Darwinian obsession of contemporary novelists to their interest in history, natural history included, and to their tendency to explain human destiny by references to modern science – the epitome of which in popular imagination is Darwin.

The aim of this paper is to challenge the critical cliché that in recent fiction Darwinism replaces religion and that the scientific worldview is always in opposition to Christian belief. A close reading of three British novels written between the late 1960s and the early 1990s – namely, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, A.S. Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia*<sup>1</sup>, and Hilary Mantel's *A Change of Climate* – will demonstrate how Darwinian references themselves evolve over time. In order to do this I shall juxtapose three aspects of the novels: primarily, the way they depict Darwin and his fellow naturalists (both historical personages and fictive characters) and thus create the myth of how modern science was born in Victorian England. Moreover, I will establish what the novelists in question understand by the word 'science' and whether for them natural science is or is not science proper; and lastly, what is their attitude to the alleged conflict between Christian belief and the theory of evolution. In the quarter century dividing Fowles's novel from Mantel's much changes in the way each of these problems is handled.

In John Fowles's famous *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a metafictional love story interspersed with authorial lectures on the Victorians and our erroneous understanding of their culture, naturalists are described as a laughing stock, though quite soon the narrator makes us aware that they apparently were far more intelligent and laborious than we presume. Most of the novel's action is set in Lyme Regis, "a Mecca for a British paleontologist" (Fowles, 43), where rocks abound in interesting fossil specimens, and a certain Mary Anning, a natural-born geologist, keeps an Old Fossil Shop where she trades her finds. The gentlemen who came to Lyme Regis were usually "Scholarly collectors of everything under the sun" (Fowles, 16), country squires who instead of drinking and womanizing indulged in natural science. Attracted by the promise of finding (or purchasing) often yet to be classified fossils and engaging in scientific discussions in the town's parlours they made Lyme Regis their pilgrimage centre. As the narrator ironically puts it: "these last hundred years or more the commonest animal in the shore has been man – wielding a geologist's hammer" (Fowles, 43).

The novel's protagonist specializes in sea urchins, so-called tests, which are beautiful but difficult to find, which fact makes them attractive enough for a gentleman to collect and moreover lets him fill the leisure time he has in abundance. The gentleman-geologist is well-equipped and his apparel is enormously uncomfortable including stout nailed boots "as suitable as ice skates" (Fowles, 45) and spacious rucksack filled with heavy hammers,

wrappings, notebooks, and pillboxes. Being a naturalist is thus a matter of fashion: you dress up for the role and act it out. Yet Fowles's amateur naturalists are surprisingly competent. They follow the day's scientific debates and know a lot from different fields of natural science: geology, botanic, ornithology and so on. As they "can afford to dabble everywhere" (Fowles, 46), they are anything but narrow specialists. The novel's characters discuss the theories of Charles Lyell described in his seminal *Principles of Geology*, the book which opened up the way for yet more ridiculous theories of Earth's history by proving that our planet is millions not thousands of years old. They also laugh at the creationist ideas of people such as Gosse, who tried to eliminate anomalies between science and the Bible by proposing that God created fossils of earlier forms together with modern species of animals. The narrator provides the reader with footnotes explaining who was who in the scientific life of the 1860s along with authorial comments summarizing the books the characters read and discuss.

Fowles's naturalists feel the nation's elite to be but "two grains of salt in a vast tureen of insipid broth" (Fowles, 141), and when they happen to recognize one another at a chance social gathering they strike one another like Crusoe and Man Friday, and greet each other with: "A Darwinianin?" "Passionately" (Fowles, 141). Thus, overall, naturalists in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are presented as affluent, decorative gentlemen-scientists and their hobby is a half-funny, half-serious quasi-scientific endeavor. As contemporary readers probably do not know the important scientific works of the period, with the possible exception of *The Origin of Species*, necessary contexts and summaries are provided.

A quarter of a century later A.S. Byatt published her novel set in the 1860s in a country manor. *Morpho Eugenia* refers to famous naturalists of the period and their publications in a casual way and the narrator feels no need to explain who they were. The popularity of neo-Victorian themes in the 1970s and 80s made such explanations redundant as a Darwinist gentleman reading his famous contemporaries is a stock figure in this type of a novel.

Byatt's protagonist, an intellectually apt butcher's son skilled at skinning animals, made his way in the world by becoming a naturalist. He collected everything, mainly flowers and insects, categorized them with the help of available wildlife encyclopedias, and ultimately made this hobby his profession. He spent ten years in the Amazon collecting and sending back to England specimens which were then sold to affluent gentlemen collectors. After his return he pays a visit to one of them, a lord who boasts one of the most precious nature collections in the country. He finds most of the specimens rotting away in a stable, but some have been made by the lord's artistically-inclined daughter into beautiful collages. The lord of the manor cuts a stereotypical figure: he is a collector and a connoisseur of natural science.

However, as the second son, before having inherited his fortune he had taken Holy Orders and is very much committed to both science and religion.

The protagonist, excepting his lowly pedigree, is a quite typical naturalist too, with “a ruling passion, the social insects. He peered into the regular cells of beehives, he observed trails of ants (...) Here was the clue to the world” (Byatt, 10). His research into ants, both in the Amazon and in the native English countryside, becomes in the course of the narrative symbolic: ants reflect human societies and the microcosm of an ant heap is the model of the macrocosm of Nature. In his conversation with the scientifically-minded squire the protagonist refers to Henry Walter Bates’s articles in *Zoology* and to the works of Bates’s friend, Alfred Wallace (later famous for his discovery of natural selection, simultaneously with Darwin). These references are a little like name-dropping, quite irrelevant to the action of the novel, yet they prove the author made her research into the natural science of the period.

The protagonist read Humboldt and W.H. Edwards, whose accounts of voyages influenced Lyell and Darwin, among others. His own research is described in reference to the real-life scientists of the epoch and their publications. The protagonist claims:

I have come to be particularly interested in ants and termites. I should like to make a prolonged study of certain aspects of their life... I may have a better explanation than that put forward by Mr Bates... and this would reinforce the observations of Mr Darwin. Certain ants... appear to have affected the form of the plants over the millennium. (Byatt, 16)

The above is a two-folded allusion: apart from putting the protagonist’s studies in the context of scientific and journalistic records of the 1860s – the real articles published in the really existing periodicals – it also anticipates what is going to happen in the next century, our times. As Byatt’s late twentieth century readers know, it was the research concerned with the behavior of social insects – ants, bees, and termites – that led E.O. Wilson to found a new branch of natural science: sociobiology. Sociobiology in turn (at least, according to Byatt’s own essays) is of special importance to modern culture, as it proves that very many patterns of behavior which used to be considered exclusively human (such as altruism) have in fact evolved in the animal kingdom as they increase the species’ chances for survival. Sociobiology is for Byatt, as she claims in the essay cited above, a lay equivalent of Christian ethics: “We look for our morality in works like Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* or E.O. Wilson’s *On Human Nature*” (Byatt, *New Writing*, 443).

The decade of the 1860s is presented in *Morpho Eugenia* as the turning point in the way people see their place in nature. The theory of evolution infiltrates popular imagination and itself becomes a cultural myth, like in Lord Tennyson’s famous poem, whose fragment Byatt quotes in the novel<sup>2</sup>:

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law –  
Though Nature red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shrieked against his creed – (*In memoriam*, qtd Byatt, 87)

Attempts at reconciling the new myth of survival of the fittest (creation which works by “Nature, red in tooth and claw”) with the older myth of God the Creator who is always good and loving were made numerous times by Victorian academics, and these often bizarre treaties are comically recalled in neo-Victorian novels. In John Fowles's book, as already mentioned, we read about the grotesque *Omphalos* by Mr Gosse, and the conservative country squire in *Morpho Eugenia* plans to write a similar apologia himself.

All the three novels analyzed here are much concerned with definitions of science. The theory of evolution is their focus because Darwinism serves in the post 19<sup>th</sup> century world as a handy metaphor of nearly everything – from social relations to the history of the Universe. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is referred to in the epigraphs to chapters in such a way as to emphasize its symbolic nature, sometimes running the risk of becoming a parody of crude social Darwinism. For example, a chapter devoted to the description of an aristocrat whose education and habits are anachronistic in an early capitalist society is introduced by the following quote:

The chief part of the organization of every living creature is due to inheritance and consequently, though each being assuredly is well-fitted for its place in nature, many structures have now no very close and direct relations to present habits of life. (qtd Fowles, 15)

The quoted passages are often among the best known, so that even the readers who know next to nothing about Darwinism would recognize definitions of phenomena, such as the survival of the fittest or natural selection. The narrator comments on the importance of the theory of evolution by saying that Darwinism has infiltrated our way of thinking to such an extent that when we think about the historical Darwin we cannot help but realize that this flesh-and-blood Victorian scientist did not “understand Darwin himself” (Fowles, 47). Yet even though contemporary readers are unconscious Darwinists, they tend to look down on Victorian natural science: “natural history had not then the pejorative sense it has today of a flight from reality” (Fowles, 47), complains the narrator, who then refers to Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Origin of Species* as to “triumphs of generalization not specialization” (Fowles, 47). Darwin's genius, according to the novel's narrator, is only seen in retrospect and consists in upsetting the immobile vision of nature as never-changing and liable to classifying, pigeon-

holing, and in general “fossilizing the existent” (Fowles, 47) in the way Linnaeus did.

The moment the protagonist finds a beautiful fossil in Lyme Regis is thus a moment of aesthetic satisfaction, not of discovery. The protagonist admires: “microcosm of macrocosm, whirled galaxies that Catherine-wheeled their way across ten inches” (Fowles, 48). He appreciates the decorative character of the fossil, but fails to realize that he himself is very much like it, a beautiful relic of a no longer existent social order.

By way of contrast, Byatt’s protagonist seems to be equipped with a better understanding of the ways of people and wildlife, and this allows him to apply his naturalist’s instinct for observation to all aspects of life. Back from the Amazon he looks at an affluent English country manor in the same way he looked at savage villages. A provincial ball with its highly ritualized dancing patterns is for him but a variation of the same social institution he observed during an orgiastic palm-wine ritual in the Amazon jungle.

Being a naturalist is for Byatt synonymous with possessing an ability to pigeon-hole every phenomenon around: architecture, anthropology, manners, botany – all is accessible on the same plane. The basic question in each case is thus to find the ruling principle turning the mass of neatly grouped phenomena into a meaningful whole. Symbolically, the lord of the manor asks the protagonist to look through a vast collection of specimens he bought over the years from researchers working in the colonies and: “make sense of it, lay it all in some order or other” (Byatt, 25). The failure of the protagonist who for hours examines, sets up, makes labels, but finally abandons the task shows his inability to build any meaningful system and create a model of nature. It is only when he starts to systematically observe the behaviour of one small colony of English ants, make notes, and finally write a book on the social history of this very anthill that he is successful. His valuable book proves to be “a supremely moving example of the inexorable secret work of natural selection” (Byatt, 102) and its readers are “struck by how completely Mr Darwin’s ideas might seem to explain [the life of ants]” (Byatt, 102). It is thus with the small scale we should start – only then are we going to see how nature works, Byatt seems to suggest. However, the protagonist is unable to devise a general principle organizing the diverse specimens of wildlife into an orderly model of Nature, nonetheless he eagerly explores the microcosm of an anthill and generalizes the results of his research cutting a proto- E.O. Wilson figure.

The most pessimistic discussion of what science is can be found in Mantel’s *A Change of Climate*, the motto for which also comes from Darwin’s writing and reads: “We are not here concerned with hopes and fears, only with truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it. I have given evidence to the best of my ability....” (Mantel, motto). This passage comes not from

*The Origin of Species* but from *The Descent of Man*, a later book in which Darwin shares with his readers his observations concerning not wildlife but the human race. Aware of the criticism the book is going to stir, he makes his reservations thus implying that the limits to knowledge are within the human mind: we research into truth as far as our intellectual abilities allow us.

Hilary Mantel's *A Change of Climate*, whose action, though concerned with the Victorian heritage of Darwinism and religion, takes place in the twentieth century (simultaneously on the two temporal planes – in the 1950s and the 1980s) refrains from entertaining the reader with portraits of period gentlemen-scientists. Instead, the book tells the story of a young scientifically inclined boy who in the mid-twentieth century finds a beautiful fossil on an English beach during his holiday stay near Lyme Regis (an echo of a parallel scene in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). Determined to become a geologist he studies natural science on his own and gets acquainted with the history of Darwinism and the diverse writings of Victorian illuminati. His decision to go to the university is opposed by his fundamentalist father who blackmails him into submission and final resignation from geology which he considers unbecoming for a Christian soul.

The protagonist gets married instead and with his young wife they go to South Africa to do charity work at a mission. Involuntarily involved in political upheaval they are sent to prison and then to a very remote village near the Kalahari. It is there that their twin children are born and, some months later, kidnapped by run-away servants. The parents manage to retrieve the baby girl, abandoned by the criminals in a ditch, but the boy, whose blood and tissues are much more valuable in native rituals, is never found. The main action of the novel takes place twenty years later. The couple lives in provincial England working for a social charity fund. They are bringing up four children and provide temporary shelter for people considered by the social service unable to cope on their own. The eldest girl, already a student, is not even aware she used to have a twin brother, but nevertheless she is somehow driven to volunteer to go to Africa with some humanitarian organization. The book is a prolonged study of how an unacknowledged tragedy, the death they never discuss but always think of, ruins the couple's life.

The Darwinian motto is bitterly ironic here: had the protagonist become an evolution-minded geologist dazzled by the beauty of fossils he would never have gone to Africa and his eldest son would not have been slain by a witch doctor. Science is beautiful yet quite useless when facing human atrocities. The moment the protagonist found his fossil is but a wonderful memory of a child: "a sharp pang of delight took hold of him, a feeling that was for a moment undistinguishable from fear. He had picked up a fossil: a ridged, gray-green curl, glassy and damp like a descending wave" (Mantel, 64). All

he learns about the geological past of our planet in general and the fossil in particular seems for the boy like a romantic vision: the warm seas of 150 million years previous, a small animal who died and whose shell was filled with sand then compacting into a rock. Geology is a fairy tale: now that the ocean is reclaiming the east coast of England fossils are coming back to the sea of their origin and only beach-combers stop them on their way. Reading natural history, mainly the history of the rocks and the soil, he performs a private trick:

to look at the landscape and strip away the effects of man. England transforms itself under the geologist's eye, the scavenger sheep are herded away into the future and a forest grows in a peat bog, each tree seeded by imagination. Where others saw the lie of the land, Ralph saw the path of the glacier; he saw the desert beneath copse and stream: and the glories of Europe stewing beneath a warm clear shallow sea. (Mantel, 72)

He imagines time as a road which he can walk back and forth and along which all geological epochs are situated and each form of life has its own place; sea urchins and magnolias alike: "it was as clear in his mind as it might be in a child's picture book... the Irish elk, the woolly mammoth, then man, stooped hairy furrow-browed. It's a success story..." (Mantel, 75). Bygone eras seem to him a kind of idyll with much sun and no people to enjoy it. Such a vision is drastically changed in the next thirty years of the protagonist's life. The nice clear vision he cherished in the 1950s by the 1980s gets marred by experience and the knowledge of life and death which turns out to be nothing but randomness. The Darwinian frame of mind explains nothing at all:

Every action contained its opposite... nothing was fixed, nothing in creation; cells made choices all the time. If we could rewind the tape of the Universe and play it over again we might find ourselves to be different: six-legged, intelligent creatures crawling on the seabed. (Mantel, 550)

He looks at his heirloom, the old fossil, which swells into a very complex symbol denoting his childhood, the romance of natural history, and the positivist dream of science in order to retrieve his long lost confidence in the logic of the world and find comfort: "the past doesn't change course: it lies behind you, petrified, immutable. What changes is the way you see it. Perception is everything" (Mantel, 606). This final conclusion belongs not to evolutionism, but to the more recent post-Heisenbergian vision of science: nature is unknowable, the uncertainty principle rules.

Fowles, Byatt, and Mantel feel equally obliged to include in their discussions of Darwinism the religious implications of the theory, but the way they do it is much different: from Fowles's simple statement that Darwinism

was a mock-equivalent of religion for agnostically-minded gentlemen-scientists, through Byatt's claim that natural history may help the human race free itself from religious fallacies necessary at lower levels of civilizational development, to Mantel's pessimistic view that neither religion nor science can give any definite answers concerning humanity's place in the Universe. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Victorian illuminati proud of having grown out of religious needs playfully replace standard rituals, such as vow-taking with their "Darwinist" new versions. In an emotionally charged moment the protagonist's friend: "turned and went to the bookshelves by his desk and then came back with... Darwin's great work... he laid his hand, as if swearing on the Bible, on the *Origin of Species*" (Fowles, 192).

In *Morpho Eugenia* two worldviews: religious and scientific stand in opposition and the only person who tries to reconcile both, the lord of the house, is doomed to fail. His study where he tries in vain to write a book proving that: "the extraordinary beauty of every creature is in itself the evidence of the work of a Creator" (Byatt, 19) is next to the manor's chapel, where he preaches daily sermons to the family and servants. His lessons are kind and to the protagonist, who was brought up in an orthodox Calvinist tradition, they seem to lack true religious zeal. The lord is aware that the vision of Christianity he had as a boy with the stories of the First Parents in Paradise, the Birth of Christ in a snow-covered stable with the Angels and the Magi is dated and now, in a post-Darwinian age he feels: "in a pit of despair itself" (Byatt, 59) because intellectually he accepts that "we are what we are because of mutations of soft jelly" (Byatt, 59). He persistently struggles to prove that "the world is the work of a Creator, a Designer" (Byatt, 33) in such a way as to at the same time confirm "the intricacy of the argument of Mr Darwin" (Byatt, 33). He knows Darwin is right, but he lacks the courage to accept the implications of the theory of evolution (ironically, in an anachronistic manner Byatt anticipates current debates: the intelligent design controversy and the discussion of "mutated soft jelly" genetics which the lord could not possibly have heard of in his days). Such conflicting aims make his book destined to failure: if ever written, it would have been a second *Omphalos*, a laughing stock for generations to come. The lord knows this somehow, and destroys all he writes, at the same time allowing his exceptional natural history collection to rot away as if to show that one cannot be both a Christian and a Darwinist.

His young guest, the protagonist, represents the next generation and a higher level of scientific awareness. Often in the Amazon among "passionate Portuguese friars" (Byatt, 24) and drug-taking Indian priests he feels suspicious to all rituals: "not only the Amazon ceremonies but the English sermons seem strange, unreal, of uncertain nature" (Byatt, 24). The protagonist, probably because of his Calvinist upbringing, tends to replace

the doctrine of predestination he was once made to believe in with Darwinist “instinct”. Consequently, though he is a full-fledged naturalist who looking at an ant community sees parallels with human social life and is capable of viewing both humans and ants as outcome of billions of years evolution of the Universe, he is still enslaved by the Calvinist belief that all organisms are predestined. Evolution, and the God of Calvin, seem powers external to life on Earth that control it entirely.

Only one character in the book, an ambitious though subdued governess who does follow the theological and scientific polemics of the day and is very much interested in ants and men, is capable of imagining a fully materialist utopia. She asks the protagonist at the end of the novel: “do you think it conceivable that there are finite beings with no afterlife – or that their natures may be fully satisfied by the part they play in the life of the whole community?” (Byatt, 117). This question, anticipating modern sociobiology, is yet left unanswered.

In *A Change of Climate* discussions conducted by the characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Morpho Eugenia* are already one hundred years old, but they still influence the way people think, especially in the evangelical east of England. The novel, apart from the already mentioned motto from *The Descent of Man*, also has a second epigraph, this time from the Book of Job: “Consider what innocent ever perished, or where have the righteous been destroyed?” (Mantel, motto). The choice of this particular book of the Bible connects Mantel’s text to the very old discussion of the reasons behind the obvious injustice so abundant in the world created by God who is said to be good and omnipotent. Yet Mantel’s novel definitely is not a modern attempt at theodicy: according to his book, there is no apparent aim of innocent suffering. It is rather people’s naiveté that makes them think that if they are good no evil will be done to them. Young British missionaries going to Africa on church-financed charity missions are “familiar with the Psalms and (among other books) the Book of Job” (Mantel, 453). Yet the narrator hastily adds: “they do not expect the Book of Job to have any practical applications” (Mantel, 450).

Mantel’s protagonist in his youth wants to believe in God and in evolution: “they weren’t contradictory... Nobody thinks there’s God on one side and Darwin on the other” (Mantel, 79), he tells his fundamentalist father who ironically anticipates Dawkins claiming that “Darwinism is atheism” (Mantel, 80). He vainly tries to persuade his father that reading geology is not sinful; and that theirs is “an old debate, it’s stale, it was never necessary in the first place” (Mantel, 81). In the end, however, he succumbs to parental emotional blackmail and does not become a naturalist, and yet he goes to Africa firmly believing in a good God and the Human who is both the final product of Darwinian evolution and “has a unique place in creation”

(Mantel, 88). He agrees neither with his sister, who referring to their father quotes Freud's definition that "religion is a universal obsessional neurosis" (Mantel, 99), nor with people who call fossils "devil's toenails" and "maintained all fossils were planted in the rocks by Satan to tempt scholars into scientific hypotheses which led them from the knowledge of God" (Mantel, 259). Thus in the fifties his own geological finds seem to him trophies taken "in the battle for reason" (Mantel, 260).

Thirty years later and having experienced the loss of his child in a bestial ritual he considers his youthful infatuation with Darwin naïve and his simultaneous belief in the Christian God a matter of unconscious yet logical choice: "I thought it was more constructive to do so. I thought that not to believe was a vote for chaos" (Mantel, 404). The world ruled by a benign God who decides for evolution to commence makes sense, it is orderly and patterned. Yet in such a world there is no place for African shamans buying white male children to use their body parts in cultish procedures and leaving female children behind as useless. The son's death is macabre and random. "But where is the pattern now?... Our lives have been ruined by malign chance. I do not see any pattern here, any reason why this had to happen" (Mantel, 441), he writes in a letter from Africa to the British priest he knows. The randomness of this tragedy and of other deaths, other tragedies, and the massive destruction so common in Earth's history make him remember his kid sister's question about the reasons for the dinosaurs' extinction and his own youthful and careless answer that "their habitat altered. A change of climate" (Mantel, 99).

The eponymous change of climate, denoting the randomness of the Universe, stands symbolically for the failure of theodicy. In Africa the protagonist felt that "it is God that took his child and cut him into pieces, dissected his child alive" (Mantel, 442). God did not prevent this, thus there is no good and omnipotent God and survival seems a matter of pure chance: his baby daughter lived while his baby son, like many other white male infants disappeared without a trace leaving behind only "substances in bottles and jars" (Mantel, 439) at the captured and arrested witchdoctors places. His friend, the priest having received the letter with the tragic news concludes: "If it is a chance, can it be malign? If it is malign, can it be a chance?" (Mantel, 441).

Nor do death and survival follow a Darwinian pattern. Not only is the baby brother's death random, but so is the baby sister's survival:

It seems a strange impulse of grace to lie a baby down in a ditch, with a storm raging. She could have drowned in that ditch, or have died of cold before we found her, or have been savaged by an animal. It seems to me that she has been selected for life and her brother for death. (Mantel, 439)

The unanswerable question is who did the selecting: both children were very healthy and physically strong, capable of survival in Darwinian terms. To say that God saved the girl would be to imply that God killed the boy. The protagonist feels abandoned by God and science, alone in the Universe, left for “eternity in the cold and the dark” (Mantel, 443) with no order and no pattern of whatever origin.

To conclude, the novels of Fowles, Byatt, and Mantel confirm the claim that the mid-nineteenth century Darwinian naturalists and intellectual debates provoked by their discoveries are still a very important subject for contemporary British novelists. Though the three novels discussed in this paper are very different stylistically and range from neo-Victorian metafiction to realism, their artistic effect springs from the juxtaposition of pre-Darwinian religiousness with the scientific worldview centered on the theory of evolution. Though the presentation of stereotypical gentlemen-Darwinists in the work of Fowles (and to a lesser degree the works of Byatt) is far from complex and rather entertaining, the introduction of Darwinian themes does serve serious ends: the discussion of the changing understanding of what science is and whether evolutionism is or is not synonymous with atheism. The latter issue is definitely not a simple replacement of God by Natural History, but a very complex problem, especially that, contrarily to what some critics claim, Darwinism itself is not an ever stable monolith, and as a frame of mind it now seems to be crumbling.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A short novel published together with her other novelette *Conjugal Angel* in the volume entitled *Angels and Insects*.

<sup>2</sup> The original is: “Who trusted God was love indeed/And love Creation’s final law/Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw/With ravine, shriek’d against his creed”.

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