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**The Aesthetic Turn**

**Assessed Essay 2**

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**The Aesthetic Movement  
and the Descent of Man**

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# The Aesthetic Movement

## and the Descent of Man

Art and science in the Victorian period were intimately linked by common cultural conventions regarding the ethical, the aesthetic and the true. I shall be looking at the ideas of Charles Darwin and the Aesthetic Movement and their critical reception in order to uncover some of these cultural assumptions. My analysis has been aided by a symposium at New York University in 2001 chaired by Linda Nochlin on the influence of Darwin's ideas on nineteenth-century art in general and the publication in 2007 of Gowan Dawson's *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* which discusses the varied responses to Darwin's ideas and the literature of the Aesthetes.

In the year that Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* Dante Rossetti started *Bocca Baciata*, the first of his 'female heads with floral attributes'.<sup>1</sup> Rossetti was one of the key artists and forerunners of the Aesthetic Movement and critical reviews of the late 1860s and 1870s linked this movement with Darwin's ideas.<sup>2</sup> This linkage is frequently mentioned but has not often been analysed in art historical terms, yet the critical reaction to each body of work throws new light upon the other. In order to structure a discussion of the wide range of critical reactions I have selected three themes to illustrate similarities and differences between the reaction to Darwin's ideas and the work of the Aesthetes—'flesh', 'progress' and 'form'.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Female heads with floral attributes' was a phrase used by W. M. Rossetti, see Bullen, R., *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> For example, between 1865 and 1878 the *Fortnightly Review* published 17 articles by T. Huxley and J. Tyndall and 40 articles and poems by A. Swinburne, D. Rossetti and W. Pater and the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review* and *The Academy* also regularly published articles and reviews of both Darwinism and Aestheticism exposing their readers to both sets of ideas.

## Flesh and Morality

Flesh is an evocative word that was used by the critics of Darwin and the Aesthetic Movement. The Aesthetes used the word to refer to an art of the senses, one that represents the sensual and the synaesthetic and recognises the correspondence between the arts, such as the connection between painting and poetry. Charles Swinburne's use of the word 'flesh' was picked by the poet Robert Buchanan and reinterpreted and used to criticize what he regarded as the sensual, coarse and immoral work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne in his article '*The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti*'.<sup>3</sup> Although he was writing about their poetry the same criticism could be applied to Rossetti's paintings, such as *Lady Lilith*, 1868 (Figure 4) but Rossetti kept his paintings out of the public's gaze, in a form of self-censorship.

Darwin also dealt directly with sex, for example, in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) and some of his critics were shocked and linked his ideas with those of the Aesthetes. Darwin was aware of the dangers of publication and, like Rossetti, had engaged in self-censorship by delaying the publication of his ideas for fifteen years.<sup>4</sup> When he eventually published his work he went to great lengths to try to ensure he could not be accused of impropriety. For example, he bowdlerized the text of

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<sup>3</sup> Buchanan wrote the review under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland in *Contemporary Review*, October 1871, see B. and J. Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1977), pp. 180-184. Rossetti was deeply disturbed by any criticism and generally had good control of the critical reaction to his work as most of the critics were friends, see Waugh (1975), p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> P. Horne, 'Autocensorship in the Age of Victoria: The Case of Gabriele Rossetti and Charles Darwin', *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2. (Apr., 1994), pp. 341-350. The article concerns D. Rossetti's father Gabrielle, who was dissuaded from publishing a poem by his patron Charles Lyell Snr., father of Charles Lyell Jr., the author of *Principles of Geology*. Geologist Lyell was a friend of Darwin and was one of those who dissuaded him from publishing in the early 1840s because of his concern about its degrading and brutalizing effect (see p. 346).

*Descent of Man* to avoid being accused of moral depravity.<sup>5</sup> Although many critics thought he had successfully negotiated this sensitive subject, in the July 1871 issue of the *Edinburgh Review* Darwin's work was criticized for 'sexual abandon' and Swinburne's for 'bestial delights'.<sup>6</sup> Later, popular references and cartoons made much of the fleshly associations of Darwin's theories and the 'long tradition of representing anthropoid apes as embodiments of the lecherous satyr of classical mythology' enabled cartoons such as 'That Troubles Our Monkey Again', *Fun*, November 16, 1872, (Figure 3), to hint at this through the erect tail and the grasping of the woman's hand. Her reluctance is perhaps also hinting at the reference in Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* of the same year to a girl who was undressed unwillingly and who blushed all over.<sup>7</sup> When Darwin published *Expression of Emotions* the *Edinburgh Review* commissioned a review from Thomas Baynes that explicitly linked Darwin with Swinburne. Baynes, in a review of *Songs before Sunrise*, accuses Swinburne of 'a feverish sensuality' and in the review of *The Expression of Emotion* he accuses Darwin of 'the study of sensuous facts' and he goes on in the later review to link both by describing followers of Swinburne as 'fluent conversational evolutionists.'<sup>8</sup>

In *Descent of Man* Darwin tries to show that local variations in the form of human beings result from sexual selection. To show this he posits male selection, a stable relationship and a local preference for different formal attributes. He uses many

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<sup>5</sup> Dawson (2007), pp. 36-41. Darwin engaged in many ploys such as using euphemisms and putting potentially shocking or salacious details in footnotes in Latin, it being assumed that it would then only be understood by university educated males.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson (2007), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Dawson (2007), p. 65. Dawson shows many, more explicit links between Darwin's work and pornography, for example, an illustration of an ape penetrating a woman from behind, see (p. 70).

<sup>8</sup> Dawson (2007), p. 48

examples from races around the world, one being that of Hottentots where the men's aesthetic preference is for women whose 'posterior part' is so immensely developed they were sometimes unable rise from the ground without first sliding along to a slope.<sup>9</sup> This excellent example of exaggerated form resulting from male sexual selection raised a number of problems for Darwin as he needed to be discreet in his language and conform to the Victorian stereotypes for woman.<sup>10</sup> A retired army surgeon, Andrew Smith, wrote to Darwin about the 'voracious sexual dominance' and 'proactive role in sexual selection' of Hottentot women which although it conformed to the Victorian stereotype of primitive lascivious black women conflicted with the coyness Darwin attributed to the female of all species throughout the *Descent of Man* and so was omitted.<sup>11</sup> Despite the care Darwin took to bowdlerize his book critics still complained about its obsession with sex. *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, the year Robert Buchanan wrote '*The Fleshly School of Poetry*'. Both Darwin and Rossetti, although for different reasons, were dealing with ideas that were at the edge of what could be dealt with in Victorian society in any form.

In the 1850s paintings of sexual conduct became popular but they were always presented as a clear moral lesson, for example Augustus Egg's *Past and Present, No. 1, 2 and 3* (1858, The Tate Gallery). The message of many of these paintings concerned the consequences to women who strayed from a strict moral code—so called fallen women.

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<sup>9</sup> Dawson (2007), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> This is discussed in the section 'Sentences Liable to the Imputation of Indecency' in Dawson (2007), pp. 29-41. One technique Darwin uses to shield general readers is to translate certain details into Latin.

<sup>11</sup> Dawson (2007), pp. 37-38. Darwin writes 'the males of almost all animals having stronger passions than the female' and he holds that the male form is generally more modified away from the young of the species, for example, the peacock's tail, as a result of female selection but this is presented as a passive selection between competing rival males.

In 1859 Rossetti painted *Bocca Baciata* and shocked many people even within his circle of friends. Holman Hunt wrote to Thomas Combe the following year equating its 'gross sensuality' with 'foreign prints', that is, with pornography.<sup>12</sup> From 1859 virtually all his major works were images of woman that he used to explore ideas of beauty, sexuality and gender.<sup>13</sup> In 1864, Rossetti started *Lady Lilith*, the first of his images of women whose sexual attraction was associated with dominance, pain and death.<sup>14</sup> In the frame is a sonnet that clearly describes her evil intentions over men and she is one of the first images of what we now call the femme fatale.<sup>15</sup> Lilith is from Jewish legend and is apocryphally Adam's first wife and is associated with child stealing, libidinal dreams and fantasies and the breaking up of marriages. It has been asserted that Rossetti presents a 'Modern Lilith' who combines the 'double edged attributes of unobtainable beauty and irresistible power.'<sup>16</sup> Amongst Rossetti's papers when he died was found a scholarly letter that shows he carried out his own research; it describes 'Lilith, about whom you ask for information, was the first strong-minded woman and the original advocate of woman's

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<sup>12</sup> Hunt described *Bocca Baciata's* 'gross sensuality of a revolting kind peculiar to foreign prints', see E. Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 108.

Griselda Pollock describes it as a 'very sensuous treatment in paint of flesh, flowers, hair and jewellery' and as a 'celebration of female sexuality, see Bullen (1998), p. 93, 104 and 108.

<sup>13</sup> Prettejohn (2000), p. 67-71.

<sup>14</sup> V. Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 2. (Jun., 1984), pp. 285-294 and E. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 99, No. 5. (Oct., 1984), pp. 936-954.

<sup>15</sup> The sonnet reads:

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
 (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve.)  
 That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
 And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
 And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
 And subtly of herself contemplative,  
 Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
 Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

<sup>16</sup> Bullen (1998), p. 136-7, Bullen uses the term 'Modern Lilith', and the quotation is from Anthony Graham.

rights.<sup>17</sup> Rossetti was concerned with representing beauty and sexuality in a novel way and the figures in *Lady Lilith* and *Bocca Baciata* are both images of what appear to be powerful independent women. Another representation of a powerful woman was *Venus Verticordia* (1864-68, Figure 6) which shows her bare breasted and holding an apple in one hand and an arrow in the other surrounded by luscious roses and tumescent honeysuckle. Ingres's *La Source* had been shown in London in 1862 but it was regarded as treating the nude in an abstract and elevating manner.<sup>18</sup> The originality of Rossetti's exploration of sexuality caused a break with Ruskin even though he was also influenced by the sensual Venetian school of painting, in particular Veronese's *Marriage Feast at Cana* which he saw in the Louvre in 1858. In the final volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin wrote that the Venetians 'saw that sensual passion in man was, not only a fact, but a Divine fact.'<sup>19</sup> However, this sentiment did not enable him to appreciate Rossetti's painting and he was abashed even by the flowers, he wrote they were 'wonderful to me—in their realism; awful—I can use no other word—in their coarseness.' So even the raw sexuality of flowers could offend and this links directly to Darwin's work on the sexual apparatus of plants.<sup>20</sup> This is despite Ruskin's appreciation of the sensual passion of Venetian painting and the clear influence of this School on Rossetti's painting.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Allen (1984), p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> A. Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> R. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 101-2 and E. Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art: 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Dawson (2007), p. 32, points out the Victorian tendency to anthropomorphism in the treatment of animals and even plant reproduction was described as marriage, for example, Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin published *The Loves of the Plants* (1789).

<sup>21</sup> Barrie Bullen has written, *Venus Verticordia* 'resembles Venetian painting not only in the priority it gives colour over line, and hence (in nineteenth-century terms) sensation over reason and flesh over spirit, it also resists narrative explanation and didactic interpretation', see Bullen (1998), p. 104.

During the 1850s Rossetti explored morality and sensuality through medieval allegory and his poem *Jenny*. *Jenny* had a long and complex gestation, it was begun as early as 1848, was rewritten in 1858, buried with his dead wife in 1862, dug up in 1869 and published in 1870.<sup>22</sup> The poem was written as a stream of thought during a night with a prostitute and was regarded as daring and provocative. But as Bullen points out the centre of discourse does not concern the male sexual reaction to a female but the 'ambiguous, fantasmagoric, and troubling responses within the libido itself.'<sup>23</sup> The poem concerns the 'ricocheting of the mind between the extremes of purity and impurity.' In this sense it is a moral poem as it tries to deal with basic human feelings and emotions. Although most of the critics were enthusiastic Buchanan wrote,

Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness...It is simply nasty.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that Rossetti's work produced a very strong reaction in Buchanan. The sexual and sensual accuracy conveyed by the work is not denied by Buchanan but he objects to it being represented at all.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> J. Seigel, 'Jenny: The Divided Sensibility of a Young and Thoughtful Man of the World', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1969), pp. 677-693 and R. Sheets, 'Pornography and Art: The Case of "Jenny"', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 2. (Winter, 1988), pp. 315-334.

<sup>23</sup> Bullen (1998), p. 70

<sup>24</sup> Dobbs (1977), pp. 181-2.

<sup>25</sup> Although it was one of the few negative reviews it affected Rossetti deeply, 'he collapsed pitifully under the unwonted strain of notoriety.' and his brother found him 'past question not entirely sane.' Waugh (1975), p. 176.

The *Edinburgh Review* commissioned William Dawkins to take on Darwin's *Descent* and he wrote a review that criticised Darwin in the same terms Buchanan used to criticise Rossetti,

But we do him no injustice in ascribing to him the theory of Lucretius—that Venus is the creative power of the world...He appears to see nothing beyond or above it. In a heathen poet such doctrines appear gross and degrading, if not vicious.

We have seen how both Darwin and Rossetti dealt with the sexual side of human behaviour and how, although both were dealing with very different aspects, the critics often dealt with them in the same way. This was because the critics were not dealing with what had been written or represented but with their own reaction to it, in other words their own 'ambiguous, fantasmagoric, and troubling responses within the libido itself.'

### **The Death of Progress**

Darwin's theories do not require an intelligent cause and do not imply progress in the sense of externally directed improvement.<sup>26</sup> This idea removes not only the need for divine creation but also the special place of human beings in the world. The term 'progress' implies a connected series of events, like an unfolding story and it is therefore analogous to the use of narrative in painting. To remove the need for progress was therefore like removing the need for a narrative element in painting and Darwin's theory was discussed at the same time that the Aesthetic Movement was introducing art without a narrative element.

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<sup>26</sup> J. Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology* (London: Collins, 1972) uses the term teleonomy to describe the apparent purposefulness of living organisms but their lack of a designer in contrast to the term teleology which is used to refer to design planned by an agent.

Darwin's ideas also gave rise to a backlash of popular interpretations many of which incorporated an idea of directed progress and some of which re-introduced a 'Divine Maker' as the explanation of what appeared to be 'intelligent design', for example Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism. Some artists, such as Evelyn Pickering de Morgan, incorporated such ideas in their art but I shall deal only with the link between the end of progress as an externally directed 'story' and the end of narrative in Aesthetic painting.<sup>27</sup>

Theories of evolution had been discussed since classical times and in 1796 Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin proposed the idea of the common descent of all living things from 'a single living filament'.<sup>28</sup> In the Victorian period these ideas were often interpreted within a Christian tradition that proposed, for example, the Deluge as the explanation for fossil remains that did not correspond to any living creatures. Evolution was explained by either assuming that when first created each organism contained within it the essence of all future forms or that each step along the evolutionary path required the intervention of a Creator.<sup>29</sup> Within this tradition man was assumed to be a special case based on Genesis 1:26 which says 'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'.<sup>30</sup>

The idea of evolution as a directed story gave rise to a mental model in which each step was seen as an improvement upon the previous one and Victorian males

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<sup>27</sup> J. Oberhausen, 'Evelyn de Morgan and Spiritualism', in C. Gordon (ed.), *Evelyn de Morgan: Oil Paintings* (London: De Morgan Foundation, 1996), p. 40

<sup>28</sup> C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: Gramercy Books, 1995, first published 1859), p. 53 and E. Darwin, *Zoonomia; or the Laws of Organic Life in Three Parts*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Edward Earle, 1818), p. 398

<sup>29</sup> This teleological approach is seen even today for example, P. Abramson, *A Defense of Creationism*, <http://www.creationism.org/genesis.htm>, accessed 12 January 2008

<sup>30</sup> J. Sterling (ed.), *The Bible: Authorized Version* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 2, a theory proposed by R. Owen, 'On the characters, principles of division, and primary groups of the Class Mammalia', *Proc Linnean Society: Zoology* (no. 2, 1858), pp. 1-37

considered themselves as the final step and the peak of this sequence. The sequence was often represented as a linear series of species or forms progressing from left to right, sometimes with a chimpanzee at the left and modern man at the right (see Figure 1: Frontispiece to Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863), for an early example). The idea of a sequence of gradual changes was used by illustrators to convey a wide variety of ideas, for example, Linley Sambourne uses it in the *Punch Almanack for 1882* (Figure 2) to show a worm changing first into a chimpanzee, then a man and finally Darwin himself. This trope of a linear sequence of changes was widely used to popularize Darwin's theory and it reinforced the idea that evolution represents progress. A belief in progress is a cultural myth with deep roots that is associated with the 'story of mankind', a belief that we are here for a purpose, and that life is improving. In the Victorian period such cultural myths were used to support pseudo-scientific ideas of progress, social hierarchy, racism, the treatment of women and ideas of degeneration. Rather than support this myth Darwin's theory undermined any idea of progress as a directed story as many scientists and other thinkers realised at the time.<sup>31</sup>

The Aesthetic Movement was born out of the idea that it should not be the purpose of art to teach simplistic moral lessons or create narratives that are better told in words. This was a bold artistic step as at the time visitors to the Royal Academy exhibition were looking for narrative paintings that told moral tales reinforcing middle-class values.

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<sup>31</sup> Some popular works, such as that of Herbert Spencer, used evolution to justify the idea of progress, see K. Pyne, 'On Women and Ambivalence in the Evolutionary Topos', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol.2, Issue 2 (Spring 2003, [http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring\\_03/articles/pyne.shtml](http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring_03/articles/pyne.shtml), accessed 12 January 2008) and M. Leja, 'Progress and Evolution at the U. S. World's Fairs, 1893-1915', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol.2, Issue 2 (Spring 2003, [http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring\\_03/articles/leja.shtml](http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring_03/articles/leja.shtml) accessed 12 January 2008). The 'blind' nature of evolution and the anti-scientific nature of 'scientific progressivism' is discussed in Monod (1972), pp. 32-50

Many paintings produced by the Aesthetic Movement resist a narrative reading. For example, Albert Moore's *Azaleas* (1876-8, Figure 5) at first looks like a scene from classical mythology but the oriental azalea and vase create an ambiguity that disrupts such a straightforward reading. The failure to find a mythological reading and the lack of clues regarding location, period or interpretation leaves the viewer confronting a timeless figure of ethereal beauty. Narrative painting creates a window onto a scene that allows us to invade the scene and judge the characters and their intentions. Such work is often judged by the clarity of the window, the relevance, roles and characters in the scene, how easily they can be read and the nature of the message conveyed by the narrative presented. Moore creates a window onto a naturalistic world but his use of anachronism prevents a narrative reading and so forces the viewer back to the surface of the thing presented and its colours, arrangements and forms. Darwin denies narrative content to life itself and Moore denies narrative content to its representation. Darwin's purpose is scientific, it enables us to make predictions concerning otherwise unknown outcomes, and Moore's purpose is aesthetic, it is to create a thing of beauty. I am not suggesting that either Darwin or Moore were reacting to the latest fashionable ideas but rather that they were both in different ways helping to bring about changes for which there was a receptive audience. This is not to suggest some form of Hegelian *geist* but something more like a change in the master narrative, what could perhaps be called a fashionable idea or an idea whose time had come.

## Form and Meaning

Darwin uses the word form to describe those attributes that can change and evolve over time and such changes require no inner or God-given meaning of the type that John Ruskin ascribed to plants and animals.<sup>32</sup> Ruskin discusses Darwin's ideas in *The Queen of the Air* and after describing his ideas, disingenuously, as 'in nowise antagonistic' to Darwin's theories he claims 'the characteristic form of the species is entirely individual'.<sup>33</sup> He goes on in Section 76 to explain that nightshades have a 'sign set in their petals, by which the deadly and condemned may always be known to us from the innocent ones.' It is clear that Ruskin's ideas are a long way from Darwin's and illustrate the Victorian teleological explanation that form is the expression of a design imposed by a moral creator specifically in relation to man's understanding. This idea of form presents it as the expression of an inner meaning and, for Ruskin, a moral purpose. Darwin's ideas require no such creator, designer, inner meaning or moral purpose and could be described as 'life for life's sake' to show their relationship with 'art for art's sake'. Both focus on form and formal properties rather than any moral purpose. Darwin creates a world in which what we see is all there is and to understand the world we need to look carefully at the forms around us. Similarly Moore creates a world of pure form in which narrative, and even symbolism have no role. In the same way that Darwin's theory did not

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<sup>32</sup> The term 'form' was sometimes used to refer to the Platonic ideal, the underlying reality behind the surface appearance and Angela Leighton traces how this changed into 'one of the most precious terms of Victorian aestheticism' in *On Form : Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-23.

<sup>33</sup> J. Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12641/12641-8.txt> accessed 25 January 2008, section 63, also see Smith, J., *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 135-6 where he argues the stakes could not have been higher for Ruskin as Darwin provides a naturalistic basis for aestheticism and therefore reduces beauty to utility, physical sensation and sexual reproduction.

require plants and animals to have a God-given meaning so Moore had no need for meaning in his work. Both push moral considerations back to the reader or viewer rather than present a moral dictator, be it God or the artist.

Walter Pater picks up this theme, reducing human life to the same basic matter as the rest of the world 'out of which forms merely grow and die.'<sup>34</sup> Scientific theories underpin Pater's aestheticism and Pater repeats the aestheticist sense of form as opposed to content and in his famous paragraph on all art aspiring to the condition of music he makes it clear that it is the constant effort of art to obliterate meaning and the subject of a poem is nothing 'without the form, the spirit, of the handling' and all art should strive to make form an end in itself.<sup>35</sup> Form provides Pater with 'a way of turning life into art, it may be that it also owes something to recent, scientific writings, specifically evolutionary theory and wave theory.'<sup>36</sup>

One sense in which Darwin uses the word form is to describe the distinct attributes of a species that evolve over time. For example, the form of the tail of peacocks has changed over time as a result of sexual selection. This change in form can be contrasted with the then commonly held view that each species has a fixed form designed and created by God. One could almost regard this view of fixed form as content, as it represents the God-given essence of the species. In a similar way art for art's sake looks at form as an end in itself and, in a sense, the form therefore carries the meaning or rather it stands in for meaning. However, for many Victorian artists and many buyers

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<sup>34</sup> A. Leighton, *On Form : Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 82-83

<sup>35</sup> Pater, W., *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 86

<sup>36</sup> Leighton (2007), p. 81

narrative was critical and they wanted paintings that told a story that related to their lives in the same way they wanted the master narrative of progress. Many works of the Aesthetic Movement defy any attempt to uncover a narrative meaning so the change from didactic Victorian painting to works of the Aesthetic Movement and the change from God-given fixed species to Darwin's ideas of form as a fluid and evolving temporal attribute both represent a move from content to form.

We can return to Moore's *Azaleas* to examine its form. It is a more than life-size figure based on numerous studies and a full length nude cartoon that he constructed using an architectural grid that was described by *Building News* as the 'only decorative painting' at the exhibition.<sup>37</sup> William Rossetti wrote that Moore was not concerned with historical accuracy but only 'a sense of beauty in disposition of form' and Algernon Swinburne agreed that 'the melody of colour, the symphony of form is complete: one more beautiful thing is achieved.'<sup>38</sup> As Darwin constructed a meta-meaning, a theory, from the analysis of form so Moore constructed a meta-meaning, beauty, from the construction of a series of shapes based on geometric rules.

## Conclusion

Darwin's core theory, like the paintings of the Aesthetic Movement, remains unchanged despite all the description, explanation, popularization, interpretation and criticism that has surrounded it. Darwin's core theory should be distinguished from his

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<sup>37</sup> R. Asleson, 'Nature and Abstraction in the Aesthetic Development of Albert Moore' in E. Prettejohn (ed.), *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> R. Asleson, *Albert Moore* (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 100.

books which as I have said bowdlerized his ideas to make them more acceptable. Darwin's core theory and the works of the Aesthetic Movement reflect ideas but remain unchanged and because they concentrate readers' and viewers' reactions and touch on so many deeply held beliefs we can learn a great deal about the commentators and therefore the 'master narrative' that constitutes their core beliefs, such as the role of women, the progress of man, religion, morality and the meaning of life. In other words we can use their reaction to analyse the master narratives of Victorian society. To simplify the task I identified three themes that provoked strong reactions in critics of Darwin and the Aesthetic Movement and tried to show how the common treatment of these themes demonstrates the underlying narrative independent of specific concerns related to Darwin's ideas or the paintings of the Aesthetic Movement.

Today we separate art and science but in the Victorian period many magazines covered both and could have a poem by Swinburne followed by an article on Darwin.<sup>39</sup> The reader was therefore aware of both areas and critics often linked them together. Darwin used the phrase 'descent of man' to refer to the evolution of the particular form of men and women based on sexual selection. However, the phrase could also be read by a Victorian Christian as the descent into the fleshy, fiery pits of hell as a result of the association between Darwin's ideas and ideas ranging from atheism to sexual depravity. Darwin and his colleagues avoided these associations by careful self-censorship of their work and by maintaining an appearance of respectability. Rossetti, Swinburne and other artists were also criticised for their sexual depravity, a common theme I call 'flesh'.

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<sup>39</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 4, July-December 1868, A. Swinburne's 'Notes on the Designs of the Old Masters at Florence', pp. 16-40 and 'Mr. Darwin's Hypothesis Part III', pp. 61-80.

Darwin's theories show that plants and animals evolve through what Jacques Monod calls 'chance and necessity'.<sup>40</sup> However, the idea of progress with man being at the pinnacle of development is deep rooted and so many ideas such as those of Spiritualism became popular as a way of 'explaining' Darwinian theories in a religious context and so re-introducing the idea of progress. I have shown how the idea of progress is associated with the idea of narrative and how the 'death of progress' brought about by Darwin's theory is associated with the 'death of narrative' in Aesthetic painting. I have also mentioned how many people resurrected ideas of progress by creating new narratives, for example new religions such as Spiritualism, and how artists such as Pickering incorporate these counter-Darwinian ideas in their art.

Finally, the form of plants and animals is not God-given but is determined by natural selection and the relative fitness of the individual to survive. I have suggested that the idea of God creating the form of an organism is equivalent to giving that form a symbolic meaning and this is reinforced by Ruskin's writings. Darwin's theories bring an end to this need for meaning and in a similar way Aesthetic art becomes a decorative art of pure beauty without any need for the painting to have a narrative or meaning.

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<sup>40</sup> Monod (1972) dismisses Marx, Bergson, Teilhard and others who assume man is the evolutionary end result of life.

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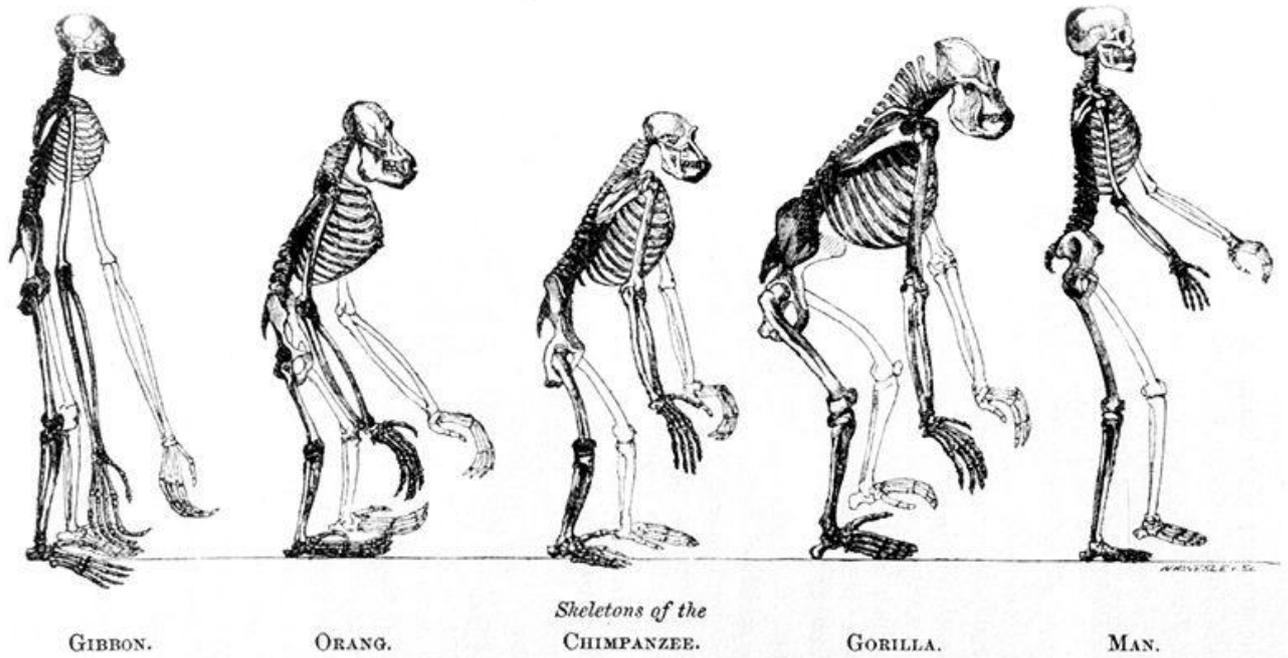
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## Illustrations



*Photographically reduced from Diagrams of the natural size (except that of the Gibbon, which was twice as large as nature), drawn by Mr. Waterhouse Hawkins from specimens in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons.*

Figure 1: Frontispiece to Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863)



Figure 2: "Man is But a Worm", wood engraving by Linley Sambourne, Punch

Almanack for 1882 (6 Dec. 1881)



THAT TROUBLES OUR MONKEY AGAIN.

Female descendant of *Marine Ascidian*:—"REALLY, MR. DARWIN, SAY WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT MAN; BUT I WISH YOU WOULD LEAVE MY EMOTIONS ALONE!"

Figure 3: G. T. [Gordon Thomson], 'That Troubles Our Monkey Again', *Fun*, (November 16, 1872), p. 203



Figure 4: Dante Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*,  
1868, Delaware Art Museum



Figure 5: Albert Moore, *Azaleas*, 1876-8, 197.9 x 100.2 cm, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin



Figure 6: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Venus Verticordia*, 1864-8, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth