

DEVIN GRIFFITHS. **The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins.**

Pp.x+339. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Hardback, £40.50.

This book offers a comprehensive and eye-opening analysis of one particular kind of analogy in nineteenth-century writing, which Devin Griffiths terms ‘*comparative historicism*’ (p.4; Griffiths’s italics). The book argues that Victorian novelists and science writers employ a model of history (derived primarily from the work of Walter Scott) in which descriptions of historical change are presented not as evidence for any totalising or teleological narrative, but as analogies that simultaneously highlight the continuities and the radical dissimilarities between different historical moments. This analogical understanding of history and narrative ‘surrenders coherence in the service of interconnection and increased precision’ (p.125), and it enables the fine-grained sensitivity to the complexities of change across time which, Griffiths persuasively argues, is central both to the plots of nineteenth-century fiction and to Charles Darwin’s argument for evolution through natural selection. One of the several admirable features of *The Age of Analogy* is its understated but thoughtful claim for the relevance of its argument to the methods of literary scholarship: comparative historicism offers ‘a way to talk about *historicisms*’ in the plural (p.209; Griffiths’s italics), and literary critics might benefit from following nineteenth-century writers in shifting their attention away from singular historical contexts and towards the interconnections and disjunctions between different historical processes.

As well as being methodologically ambitious, *The Age of Analogy* is astute in its close reading of textual details; in each of the book’s chapters, Griffiths shows how analogy operates both at the macro and the micro-level, tracing variations on the basic structure of analogical reasoning—‘A is to B as C is to D’ (p.31)—in the syntax, as well as the narratives and arguments, of nineteenth-century writing. After a ‘prelude’ that offers a detailed

summary of theories of analogy, the book's first chapter examines how Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus, in his didactic poem *The Botanic Garden* (1789-91), uses an extended analogy between plant biology and human behaviour as the foundation of a 'utopian thesis of collective political, organic, and natural improvement' that 'powerfully confused biological development with social progress' (p.80). The second chapter, which is at the centre of the book's argument, claims that this kind of Enlightenment teleology is replaced in the work of Walter Scott by a comparative historicism that emphasises the complex interactions between a plurality of incommensurate historical processes. According to Griffiths, this comparative historicism, shaped by Scott's antiquarian researches and his interest in philology, was an important influence on Victorian understandings of historical fiction and of evolution. In particular, it contributed to the focus on the sympathetic imagination that was characteristic of nineteenth-century theories of fiction: the radical dissimilarity between past and present demanded that writers and readers exercise imaginative sympathy in an effort to bridge the gap. The book's final three chapters examine how Scott's comparative historicism informed literary and scientific representations of historical change in the work of George Eliot, Alfred Tennyson, and Charles Darwin.

The chapter on the younger Darwin exemplifies the strengths of the book's method. Griffiths presents a sustained analysis of the analogical syntax of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, his 1862 monograph on orchids, and his notebooks, and concludes that Darwin uses analogies between the developmental histories of different organisms to stage 'a series of intersubjective, sympathetic engagements' between his readers and other forms of life (p.255). It is not clear whether sympathy with other species is the same kind of feeling as sympathy with characters in historical fiction, and Griffiths does not directly address this question. Nonetheless, it is to his immense credit that he has found something genuinely fresh to say about the much-discussed subject of Darwin's literary style. The book's penultimate chapter,

which focuses on George Eliot's use of disanalogy (or mistaken analogy) as an epistemological tool for constructing sympathetic understanding between different people, is similarly astute, if not as innovative in its argument.

In contrast, the chapter on Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is not wholly successful, primarily because its practice diverges from the book's methodological theory: it considers Tennyson and a range of science writers side-by-side, rather than actively examining the connections between them. The chapter suggests that, in its interlinked speculations about the spiritual future of Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam and the biological future of humanity, *In Memoriam* presents something similar to Erasmus Darwin's progressive teleology: 'the poem overwrites the differential implications of comparative historicism with a single, capacious history, a vision of total incorporation' (pp.163-4). This is fair enough, but Griffiths implies that the poem's singular history is an anomaly (perhaps resulting from the generic conventions of elegy), a deviation from the Victorian norm of comparative historicism. This claim is not persuasive: in his effort to emphasise Victorian writers' incredulity towards metanarratives, Griffiths contravenes his own methodological strictures, focusing on one historical trend at the expense of others. *The Age of Analogy* says little about the influential aspect of Victorian evolutionary thought that, with Tennyson and Erasmus Darwin, championed the possibility of a single and universal process of biological, social, and moral development. This model of evolution, exemplified in the work of Herbert Spencer, was an important counterweight to the comparative historicism which Griffiths's book explicates so thoroughly.

Despite this, *The Age of Analogy* represents a valuable contribution to scholarship on literature and science. Building on the established models of new historicism and of Gillian Beer's foundational work on Darwinism, it nonetheless offers something new by asking researchers in this field to think more carefully about the kinds of historicism that operate

both in their own work and in nineteenth-century literary and scientific writing. The book also points to an important area for future research. Griffiths notes that his specific focus on historical analogy is determined by his book's exclusive consideration of the historical science of evolution, as opposed to "normative" or "predictive" sciences' such as mathematics and physics (p.11). But analogical thinking in general was an important feature of the inductive methods of a range of nineteenth-century scientific disciplines; Griffiths's ambitious readings of historical analogies may offer a model for studying how other kinds of analogical language were shared between literature and (for example) the physical sciences in the nineteenth century.

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