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# Charles and the Hopeful Monster: Postmodern Evolutionary Theory in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

TONY E. JACKSON

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* clearly enough tells a story involving the great crisis of Darwinism in Victorian England. But we should look closely at the precise way in which Fowles represents this crisis, otherwise we may miss the significance of the Darwin of our own time, which is equally important in the novel.<sup>1</sup> The book makes it plain that we have this later Darwin to consider. Of his protagonist, Charles Smithson, the narrator tells us that "Charles called himself a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin. But then, nor had Darwin himself" (45). We here in the late twentieth century have corrected at least some of these earlier misunderstandings and in the process of doing so have defined ourselves historically. For as Dr. Grogan says at one point, *The Origin of Species* is "about the living . . . not the dead" (131). Our understanding of evolution determines in a profound way our understanding of ourselves as living beings. And of course modern culture is "a culture dominated by evolutionary ideas" (Beer 5) to the point that many who have never actually read any evolutionary theory take the basic idea for granted.

Writers such as Gillian Beer, Sally Shuttleworth, and Redmond O'Hanlon have studied the effects of an actual reading knowledge of Darwin on famous Victorian writers. George Levine, on the other hand, in *Darwin and the Novelists*, has discussed the way Darwinism permeates Victorian realism, even "among writers who probably did not know any science first hand" (3). But Levine does not set out simply to show that fictional narratives and Darwin's evolutionary theory get constructed in similar ways. Rather he aims

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to shadow forth a Darwin more disruptive, perhaps, than even the greatest of his literary followers can suggest, a Darwin who, if fully absorbed by his contemporary novelists, might well have led to other kinds of narratives. (22)

In other words, Levine will read Victorian novels in light of what we *now* know of Darwin's ideas. For Darwinism has changed since Darwin himself was alive. In the same way that Darwinism embodied the assumptions of the Victorian novel and, conversely, the Victorian novel embodied the Victorian Darwin, so we shall find that the postmodern or "fully absorbed" Darwin embodies the postmodern novel and, conversely, the postmodern novel—in this case *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a paradigmatic example of one of those "other kinds of narratives" suggested by Levine—embodies the postmodern Darwin. To explain this relationship, we will first need to establish what seems postmodern about recent Darwinian theory, and having done this we will then examine Fowles's novel.

By the postmodern Darwin, I mean that in the last 30 to 40 years certain ideas have become especially prominent in evolutionary theory, and these ideas are of a kind with a host of other ideas that many of us lump under the term postmodernism. Of course developments in evolutionary theory have arisen from within the scientific disciplines involved. But it is also true that disciplinary histories are not purely self-contained affairs. Historical periods may be defined by related complexes of thought appearing contemporaneously across wide areas of knowledge and interest. The elements of postmodern thinking that will be most relevant here revolve, as always, around the fundamental critique of metaphysical absolutes of all kinds, a metaphysical absolute being any representation that is taken consciously or unconsciously as entirely self-contained, self-identical, self-present, and therefore outside the realm of culture, history, desire, and ideology. The critique may be direct, as in overtly deconstructive kinds of interpretations, or it may be indirect, a corollary to certain other analyses. Thus Thomas Kuhn's recasting of the history of scientific revolutions plays a part in the critique of metaphysics even though this is not the specific aim of his argument. In any case, whatever the particular realm in which the critique of metaphysical absolutes occurs, one common outcome is the discovery that absolutes of this kind always function as unconscious anchors for a certain kind of identity. So the critique typically involves two most general results: It reveals that a given absolute is in fact a construction of history, culture, and desire, and it reveals that the construction has been misrecognized as an absolute because a certain self or cultural or sexual identity depends

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on not seeing the construction as a construction.

History has been a primary realm of investigation for the postmodern critique, and one common conclusion has been that chronological, developmental histories operate, simply as a function of their narrative form, to establish the absolute presence of a certain sense of self. The teleological form of the conventional narrative history presupposes the self-evident truth of cause and effect over time and of historical "facts" that precede the constructions of histories about those facts. One way or another, the influential writings of such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Paul de Man, and Kuhn (we will return to these below) have shown that this notion of history is not supportable as it has traditionally been conceived. Taking the critique further along, Foucault, de Man, and those coming after them have shown how this kind of history is unavoidably essentialist or anthropocentric: Not only historical fact but also the self who is the implied subject of this version of history is assumed by the discursive form of narrative history to exist as a kind of Platonic essence outside of that discourse. But this subject is in fact a production of historical and other discourses, and therefore it turns out that the subject of narrative history is a comforting illusion. Postmodern interpretations of history, in whatever realm they occur, work to avoid essentialism of this kind, and as a result they tend not to be narrative histories in the traditional sense.

To turn now to the idea of postmodern evolutionary theory, perhaps the most distinguishing difference between late twentieth-century and nineteenth-century Darwinists involves a strict avoidance of an anthropocentric evolutionary story—that is, the version of natural selection in which *Homo sapiens* always becomes the *telos* or goal of the evolutionary path, the version in which, as Stephen Jay Gould has said, "the word itself [evolution] becomes a synonym for *progress*" (*Wonderful Life* 32). This problem may be impossible to avoid entirely: It seems self-evidently true that we human beings are superior in key ways to all other life, and since evolution has brought us about, then we must be the progressive aim of evolution. But this is not a necessary conclusion from Darwin's thinking. Darwin himself was inconsistent with respect to the issue of evolution as progress. For instance, in *The Origin of Species* he writes that "natural selection, or the survival of the fittest, does not necessarily include progressive development" (128). But then in *The Descent of Man* he claims that humanity stands at "the very summit of the organic scale" (797). The assumed existence of this kind of scale in material nature is the ideological core of social Darwinism. Current Darwinists, even those who disagree on other significant issues, reject such thinking. Thus, both Daniel Dennett

on the one hand and Stephen Jay Gould on the other, open recent, important books with a discussion of this problem. In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett writes of "the most common misunderstanding of Darwinism: the idea that Darwin showed that evolution by natural selection is a procedure *for* producing us" (56). Gould opens *Wonderful Life* claiming that "we usually choose to construct [an evolutionary] ranking of implied worth," the top rank always being occupied by ourselves, and that the "familiar iconographies of evolution are all directed . . . toward reinforcing a comfortable view of human inevitability and superiority" (42, 28).

So recent Darwinism rejects anthropocentrism in much the same way that so many recent investigations in the humanities—from deconstruction to gender studies to new historicism to postcolonial studies—reject various kinds of essentialisms. But while all Darwinists reject a human-centered teleological story, they do not necessarily agree about just what constitutes such a story. One great contemporary point of disagreement remains the same as in Darwin's day: how to include chance in evolution. If natural selection is not to be a disguised theology, it must include randomness, but since scientific theories typically set out to show the determined and orderly in nature, the trick is how to include randomness without giving up a sufficiently compelling sense of order. Darwin's own views on chance are, as Levine says, "contradictorily stated throughout his books, his letters, his journals" (92), but in any case while Darwin was aware of "the probabilistic nature of selection, the modern evolutionist emphasizes this even more" (Mayr 164). Still, as Richard Dawkins puts it, "We can accept a certain amount of luck in our explanations, but not too much. The question is *how* much?" (139). In recent decades we find two most prominent considerations of chance. Writers such as Dennett and Dawkins stress one version, which is sometimes known as the neo-Darwinian synthesis (Dennett 20, Mayr ch. 9). Evolutionary change happens as a function of genetic mutation. Any given mutation occurs at random. Nonetheless, chance gives way to a determined path of development when we look at the long run of evolution: The "whole sequence of cumulative steps constitutes anything but a chance process" (Dawkins 43). Fowles, in his final epigraph, brings a version—Martin Gardner's—of this Darwin overtly into the novel:

Evolution is simply the process by which chance (the random mutations in the nucleic acid helix caused by natural radiation) cooperates with natural law to create living forms better and better adapted to survive. (361)

But as we shall see, Fowles's novel actually gives us a version of Darwin

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after the model of Stephen Jay Gould. Gould argues that it is anthropocentric to constrain chance as Dennett and Dawkins (and Darwin) do. "Perhaps," he says,

the grim reaper of anatomical designs is only Lady Luck in disguise. Or perhaps the actual reasons for survival do not support conventional ideas of cause as complexity, improvement, or anything moving *at all* humanward. (48, emphasis added)

To Gould, the assumption or attribution of any global rightness of evolutionary outcome is an unjustified, teleological repression of the significance of randomness. Any developmental evolutionary narrative assumes the rightness of the ending and in doing so falsely attributes a human value scale to nonhuman, material reality. As a result Gould writes: "*Placement in time is conflated with judgment of worth*" (39). Since all teleologies are human constructions, all are anthropocentric. Gould argues that this kind of story appeals because it makes us feel better: it "[nurtures] our hopes for a universe of intrinsic meaning defined in our terms" (Gould 43). With such a conclusion Gould's alignment with other postmodern versions of history becomes ever more apparent. We may recall, for instance, Paul de Man's argument that all teleological history depends on a "temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure in which the past is like an ancestor begetting, in a moment of unmediated presence, a future capable of repeating in its turn the same generative process" (164). Similarly, Michel Foucault rejects teleology because such a history "assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (78). Gould's "intrinsic meaning" is the same as de Man's "unmediated presence" and Foucault's "immobile forms."

The most famous Victorian response to Darwin was outraged rejection. But the next most famous response was the anthropocentric one that, while admitting the loss of supernatural prestige for humanity, nonetheless found comfort in the fact that at least we were at the top of the natural order. This latter is just the self-satisfying understanding of Charles, the earnest Darwinist, at the beginning of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. To Charles, the discoveries of Darwin provide "an immensely reassuring orderliness in existence," an "edificality of time, in which inexorable laws . . . very conveniently arranged themselves for the survival of the fittest and best," the latter of course being humanity, and particularly humanity as represented by Charles himself (45). This understanding manages to preserve the kind of unjustified value judgment that had in fact been central to the pre-Darwinian version of the order of life, the ladder of nature put forth by the Swedish botanist, Linnaeus. Such thinking, then, ignores

what is most unsettling about Darwin's ideas. As we shall see, Charles learns the falseness of this understanding in a very distinctive way.

To complete our discussion of Darwinian theory, Gould's inclusion of chance makes him the most postmodern of contemporary Darwinists. It has led him to put forth a theory of change, called punctuated equilibrium, that stresses abruptness and discontinuity rather than the more conventional gradualist story, and thus he is the Darwinian equivalent of, again, Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault. Kuhn, like Gould, holds that the actual historical record does not support a gradualist "development-by-accumulation" story, and that arbitrariness and retrospectivity (we will return to retrospectivity below) are essential to historiography (Kuhn ch. 1). In light of this kind of historiographical conviction, Gould has revived the idea of the "hopeful monster" (*Panda's Thumb* 186–93), which is the notion that key changes in evolution involve the relatively sudden appearance of a relatively radical newness on the scene.<sup>2</sup> Such newness will by its nature seem monstrous and alien in relation to the already established kinds of life around it. Further, it will be at first only "hopeful" because it is by chance that the mutation will have found itself in an amenable environment and thus be able to reproduce itself successfully.

Now although Darwinian theory derives from the biological realm, these ideas have always been transplanted into the very different bodies of psychology and culture, and this is what occurs in Fowles's novel. Most importantly in this respect, we clearly see Charles undergo a kind of mental evolution—a change from a Victorian to a twentieth-century sense of self—brought about by the manipulations of Sarah. But right away we must be wary of the implications of moving from biology to these other realms because of the old and real danger of social Darwinism. Still, if we agree to the truth of biological evolution, it is difficult to resist the idea that what explains the body ought to explain, at least in certain very important ways, the mind and self. But this is where Gould's ideas prove useful. Gould's inclusion of chance and disallowance of teleology prevent the notion of psychocultural evolution from becoming another form of social-Darwinist essentialism. In other words, if we consider how an idea or culture or self emerged as a process of natural selection in Gould's terms, then we will be careful not to argue or imply that the idea, culture, or self *had* to appear when and as it did. For as soon as we have done that, we have created a teleological explanation that, intentionally or not, reveals that endpoint to have always been destined to happen, and so to have always been what *ought* to happen, the right ending to the story. We have written a human value judgment, which can only come from the realm of individual and cultural desire, into material reality. The immediate

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corollary is that other endings are somehow wrong or inferior, and *ought* to be wrong or inferior because the material universe has created them that way. A postmodern Darwinism can at least try to avoid this.

So we need to look again at the emergence of the twentieth-century or existentialist self in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Needless to say, other critics have discussed the way Sarah brings about the great change in Charles, but too often Sarah is represented as a superior type of self-consciousness, the magus figure who comes to *teach* Charles the knowledge she already commands. Katherine Tarbox, for instance, says that Sarah "teaches . . . by parable, by telling stories" (71). Tarbox sees all the events, from the meetings on the Undercliff to the sex in Exeter to Sarah's disappearance, as consciously planned by Sarah with the specific goal of giving Charles an "education" in existentialism. Sarah "sees that Charles, caught in an evolutionary incident and metaphorically buried in a landslide, is becoming fossilized. She simply tries to show him the way out" (71). Similarly, Ellen McDaniel writes that Sarah maneuvers with a purpose, that she has a specific strategy "to help . . . Charles . . . reconstruct" his life (36). In Charles Scruggs's fine reading, one that like my own deals directly with the evolution of consciousness, he speaks regularly of what Sarah "sees" about the meaning of life, of what Sarah "realizes" about the existential predicament, and of Sarah's "epiphany." But he must also add that such claims are "not to say that Sarah understands the problem philosophically. The extent of her awareness of any of these things is problematical" (103). And indeed it is. Fowles allows us only a very limited certainty about Sarah's motives. We can see *that* she plans, but as to the extent of her plans and as to the motives of her plans, Fowles leaves us with an enigma.

And I would argue that a postmodern version of evolution can best explain the enigma. The representation of Sarah, the enigmatically new, the hopeful monster of change, helps us to see the kind of evolutionary theory that actually emerges in the book. And, at the same time, evolutionary theory helps us to see the nature of Sarah. She is a suddenly occurring new kind of self, and Charles is the means by which the new self secures its survival. Newness in this version of evolution has a certain important temporal quality. Recent Darwinism continually stresses that the new can only be known with hindsight. Dennett says of the beginning of a new species that "you can't tell that it is occurring at the time it occurs! You can only tell much later that it has occurred, retrospectively crowning an event when you discover that its sequels have a certain property" (96). Newness of this kind, like Lyotard's postmodern art, can only be the origin for "what *will have been done*" (81) in the history of the

self. Strictly speaking, a given new evolutionary event should always be described in the future anterior tense that writers such as Derrida and Lacan have made central to recent understandings of temporality. Given this, it must be the case that the hopeful monster will not, in a crucial way, know what it is. In other words, the original appears in some important way fully formed as new, as the first step in what can only later on become definable as a trail through the wilderness of raw history. It will not have had the experience of passing *from* being the old *to* being the new, and so will not have had the contrasting knowledge by which to know the full significance of its newness. In biological history this will not be relevant, but as we shall see, in the history of the self it will be crucial. For the hopeful monster in the history of the self will not quite know why it is acting as it does. Which brings us back to the question of Sarah's knowledge.

Despite the title of the book, we have primarily the story of Charles. Even in chapter 36, the one chapter most Sarah's own, the narrator says right out that he simply does not "intend to find out what was going on in her mind" (221). Nonetheless, the narrator himself mentions Sarah as "the protagonist." But of course he does so in the midst of admitting his own ignorance: "My problem" as narrator, he says, "is simple—what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment" (317). And in fact throughout the novel Fowles manages to keep the protagonist available to us only in the way she is available to Charles. Like Charles, we are constantly seeing Sarah with "her face . . . half hidden" (136), with "her face turned away" (100), constantly looking down at her hands or out to the sea. In all the most dramatic scenes between Charles and Sarah, descriptions of her actions are peppered with the ambiguous phrase *as if* and words such as *seems* and *almost*. These descriptive ambiguities can of course support the idea that Sarah has actually planned what, to Charles, appears to happen by chance.

I will give only three of many examples. The second time Charles runs into Sarah in the Undercliff, she acknowledges him but "seemed to hesitate, as if she would have turned back if she could" (98). After what we learn of her later, this *could* mean that she was already setting up a trap or lesson, depending on which ending one favors. When Charles advises her that the French lieutenant, if he is worthy of her, will seek her out even if she leaves Lyme, he receives only a "long silence." Moving, as he so often does "so that he could see the side of her face," he finds that "her expression was strange, almost calm, as if what he had said had confirmed some deep knowledge in her heart" (102). Retrospectively, this *could* mean she now knows that Charles will follow her if she disappears

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after luring him into love. This scene ends with a batch of such "as ifs." Later, when Sarah asks Charles to be her confessor, he asks, why him? She begins "as if the question had been expected—to speak rapidly, almost repeating a speech, a litany learned by heart" (116). This *may* mean that she has rehearsed the moment. We cannot know for sure until the end, and clearly enough this trail of ambiguities will equally well lead to more than one ending.

And yet we do know that Sarah has planned some of her actions, at least to a degree. She intentionally exposes herself to Mrs. Fairley, and she tells the lie about the French lieutenant. We witness her setting up the scene in Exeter. But in fact only after Exeter can we look back and suspect that she may have been planning from the very first. To help clear up our uncertainty, we may consider Sarah's own understanding of herself and her situation. But we cannot, for the most part, be sure of these either. We can be sure that Sarah feels entirely out of place in the world. She feels born to suffer, born to be isolated. It seems to her "ordained" as part of the nature of things that the world is the "generality to which [she] must be the exception" (139). But of course her own actions only intensify these feelings. At one point she blames those around her for their lack of compassion and says that "whatever sins I have committed, it is not right that I should suffer so much" (116). And yet she herself has taken action to cause people to reject her. Educated above her own class, she suffers in the conventional way that governesses in Victorian novels suffered. Nonetheless, she feels that, not just because of her life circumstances but because of her nature, she categorically cannot be happy. It is not that governesses in general are unhappy, but only, as she says, "All like myself" (138). But then there do not appear, really, to be any others quite like her, certainly not in Victorian fiction; and neither Charles nor the narrator can ever quite categorize her, even though on the surface her story and situation seem common to the point of stereotype. And of course she hides the knowledge of the French lieutenant's marriage so that she will be what she "must be. An outcast" (145).

The fabric of Sarah's self-understanding, then (before the endings), is woven from negative threads. And the narrator relates this sense of self to the existential self-image that he associates with the twentieth century. In a clearly Sartrean moment, Sarah speaks of feeling alienated even from the world of objects: "even things—mere chairs, tables, mirrors—conspire to increase my solitude," she says (139). She confesses that her choice to marry shame by following the French lieutenant gives her a "freedom" that others around her cannot understand, one that enables her to be "truly not like other women," to be "nothing," "hardly human,"

to have achieved a kind of negative superiority from which she can “almost pity” those who have not made this kind of choice (142). This is of course the language of existentialism, but significantly, while the narrator actually mentions several times the word *existentialism* with respect to Charles, he never does so with respect to Sarah. We will return to Charles below, but what matters here is that although Sarah can describe herself in these terms, she cannot in an important way unravel their import. Of course she knows that she is miserable and isolated, but she lacks the understanding by which to assess what her misery and isolation mean. In one sense this lack is simply part of her nature. She is unique in part because she cannot think things out, cannot analyze the sources and meanings of her own case. Her intelligence, as the narrator tells us, consists of “an instinctual profundity of insight” (48). Hers is “not in the least an analytical or problem-solving” intellect. She possesses an “uncanny” ability to classify and make “poetic judgments” about people but “without being able to say how” she does so. She is simply able “to understand [others], in the fullest sense of that word” (47). Evidently the fullest sense of the word does not include the ability or necessity to consider rationally. The new kind of self has not *learned* to be perceptive in her distinctive manner. Rather, she simply is this way, naturally, just as she is naturally isolated and alienated.

Further, though she understands others in an instinctive, prerational way, she seems bound not to understand herself at all. At the end of the scene in Exeter when her deceptions have been revealed, she can only say: “Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained” (279). And much later, in the scene that leads into both the “happy” and the existential ending, she says: “I am not to be understood even by myself. And I can’t tell you why, but I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding” (354). So we have a paradox: The protagonist is blessed with a clearly exceptional mind, and yet she cannot understand her own situation. Sarah’s lack here derives from the fact that she is unable to historicize herself. On the individual level, because she has always been as she is, she cannot see herself in relation to an other condition from which she has emerged. Further, because she appears as a case of historical newness, there has not yet been formulated a vocabulary by which to categorize her condition in general. In other words, neither her own individual history nor the larger, public histories—philosophical, psychological, biological—offer her a means of knowing herself historically. Thus, although she can describe her pain and anguish and loneliness well enough, she cannot see that just this batch of qualities themselves constitute a specifiable historical condition. In an important way she has experience

without knowledge.

All these traits work to show that Sarah "has attained selfhood before the novel begins," but this does not mean that she "knows who she is and in her own freedom . . . knows how to encourage the grasping of freedom by others" (Palmer 75). She may have planned—Grogan is wrong to say that "no one of foresight could have behaved as she has" (Fowles 179)—but the fact that she herself cannot explain her own actions suggests that she has acted almost spontaneously, simply as a part of being who she is, rather than as a part of some elaborate, preconceived design. Robert Huffaker, also reading for evolution, grasps this unconscious element in Sarah's machinations when he says that "Sarah, although she guides [Charles] into the agonizing process that leads eventually to freedom for them both, is not necessarily aware, in a rational sense, of what her proceedings are effecting" (109). But then Huffaker goes on to speak of Sarah in Jungian terms, which ignores both the very anti-Jungian nature of existentialism as well as the "fully absorbed" Darwin that we find in the novel. As the narrator says at the very end, she seems to be acting what she knows (365). But this does not imply that she knows what she acts, and the distinction between the two statements matters because the existentialist, properly speaking, creates herself authentically by making very conscious choices of action.

So, given all this, we may say that Sarah appears on the Victorian scene as a mutation among existing self-representations, a kind of hopeful monster. A hopeful monster, a suddenly new mutation, must encounter the contingently occurring environment into which it is thrown. This is why it is "hopeful." It has neither chosen nor been chosen to be what it is because of the environment; therefore, it is chance as to whether the environment will favor it or not. In terms of the evolution of the self, the new type will almost certainly be feared and rejected simply because it will not be categorizable. It will presumably share some traits with the already existing set of qualities by which kinds of people are known. In other words, it will be recognizable generally as a human being, but beyond this it will be all wrong. Obviously enough, this is true of Sarah. Though she comes in the form of a Victorian governess, in fact she fits none of the roles by which women could be known at the time. And Fowles does not really help us to know why she should be as she is. Given only a bare minimum of her history, we can make only the most vague and general sociohistorical explanations for her situation. After all, Jane Eyre lived much the same life as Sarah but did not grow up to be an existentialist.

With respect to the analogue of the evolution of consciousness, the hopeful monster would, at least at first, also be unable to recognize *itself*

as any kind of positive being. As we have seen, this is the case with Sarah. Since human self-images always involve the reinforcement or mirroring of other self-images, a wholly new self-image will have no way to apprehend itself, except negatively. And worse, in an *unamenable* environment any new mutation would constantly make itself more monstrous the more it fulfilled its newness. As Sarah acts to force out into the open her newness and difference, as she becomes ever more fully just her unique self, she steadily becomes more outcast from any of the ostensibly healthy roles around her. On the one hand, then, she seems to act from some unusually coherent inner core. This is the quality that strikes us in the flawless way she manipulates Charles. But on the other hand, it is not a core that we can recognize, certainly not in Victorian terms.

Since the actions—the lie about the French lieutenant, letting herself be seen by Mrs. Fairly, seducing and abandoning Charles—that seem self-destructive in fact bring Sarah to be more fully the new kind of self that she already was, this means that she never really goes through a significant change, never really knows herself *differently*, which is the essence of transformative self-recognition. She does, however, lead Charles to retrace the painful steps of seduction, abandonment, and public estrangement that reinforced her “natural” condition. That is, the plot of the novel involves Sarah leading Charles through a repetition of her own story: She becomes the enigmatic seducer in relation to himself as the duped lover. Why? Even after creating the story about the French lieutenant, she still remains only an anomaly of alienation, only a strangely unique kind of outcast. For this reason, she is, it would seem, simply compelled to reproduce herself in Charles. Otherwise, she will never be more than a hopeful monster. And this brings us to her involvement with Charles.

Throughout the Undercliff scenes, Sarah seems primarily to seek, as Grogan and Charles think, the relief of confession. In her own words she seeks understanding (118) and forgiveness (146) from Charles. While her desire for understanding seems understandable, the desire to be forgiven for something that she has not really done is harder to grasp. Apparently she is asking for forgiveness simply for being herself, for being so outside the realm of normality, which, intolerant as we humans typically are, must be construed as a sin. Charles, however, cannot see this. He says outright that he is hardly the one to dispense forgiveness, and yet he assures her that she “is forgiven” (147). But she responds with the implicit fear that besets all hopeful monsters: “And may be forgotten,” she says. This statement, I would argue, is the key statement of Sarah’s motivations. And we must assess its significance in light of the fact that she is not

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satisfied with his *saying* that he will not forget her. For he does this once Sarah has made plain her feelings for him, once they have said they will never see each other again, and once she has agreed to leave Lyme. "I shall never forget you," Charles says as they part for what he thinks is the last time (206). This will not do for Sarah. She continues until the repetition of her own story is complete, until she has reproduced herself as a type.

And a postmodern version of the evolution of consciousness helps us understand the *way* she reproduces herself in Charles. Where Sarah has experience without historical knowledge, Charles will undergo a transformation, an individual, self-historicizing experience, and so will have a kind of self-knowledge that Sarah never really has. He will lack only the philosophical vocabulary through which his kind of experience will become recognizable as a historical concept. Early in the novel, Charles is the stereotype of the complacent Victorian gentleman, but he does have a certain elusive sense of "malaise." Charles himself cannot understand this, we are told, because he lacks the twentieth-century vocabulary of "existentialist philosophy" (60). But of course the more he becomes knotted into Sarah's story, the more he comes to understand himself differently. The change in his understanding occurs in two most relevant ways. He will experience senses of fear and anxiety that the narrator will interpret for us more and more in the language of existentialism. At the same time, we will see Charles's own sense of what he is undergoing in terms of a change in his understanding of Darwinism. Though he does give up fossil collecting, he will not be, as Peter Conradi has described it, "[deserted] by evolution" and then saved by existentialism (75). There will not be a "metaphysical transition . . . from a Darwinian to a social and existentialist level of understanding" (Fawcner 81), nor will he be "rescued" from Darwinism by existentialism (Salami 125).

The idea of evolution cannot just somehow go away, but it can change. Charles's transformation will involve leaving behind only the anthropocentric, Victorian Darwin. Interestingly enough, Sarah lives in what was already a famous fossil-finding area, but educated as she is, she does not appear to know about fossils. She knows that Charles collects tests, but he has to explain to her what they are (114). So of the two threads—one a philosophy, the other a scientific theory—that eventually weave themselves into the fabric of the twentieth-century self, one (existentialism) is associated with Sarah only in the way I have described, while the second (Darwinism) seems out of her ken altogether. Both come together in Charles. His case makes it appear that the philosophy and the biological theory are mutually implicative: The existentialist self implies the (postmodern) Darwinian story of humankind, and the Darwinian story

implies the existential self as the evolutionary subject.

In Sarah's confession scene in the Undercliff, Charles easily comprehends the hackneyed Victorian story of the young woman who follows after the dashing but false young man. But when Sarah describes her feelings rather than just her actions, she loses him: "this talk of freedom beyond the pale, of marrying shame, he found incomprehensible" (143). Later, when Charles goes back on his word to Grogan and walks out to see Sarah by the old barn (thus further committing himself to her), he experiences a moment of revelation in the forest, suddenly grasping "the universal parity of existence," the fact that nature has no built-in value scale. He realizes the falseness of the comforting, "pseudo-Linnaean" (191) version of evolution that he had known earlier in the novel, before meeting Sarah. This revelation about Darwinian truth comes in tandem with an existentialist sense of isolation and anxiety. Charles now feels that "the trees, the flowers, even the inanimate things around him were watching him" (192). Still, at this point he only apprehends a "deeper and stranger reality" with vague but "hostile implications" (192). At the end of the scene, as if being pulled along in spite of himself, he takes "the path formerly used by Sarah" (192).

We run into existentialism again just after the first "ending," the one imagined by Charles on the train back from London to Exeter. In this imaginary ending, he does not follow the path formerly used by Sarah but simply returns to Tina and a dull but comfortable future in which he becomes "one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history" (262). Consequently, Sarah turns out to have been only a hopeful monster and nothing more. Not having brought Charles to repeat her experience, she has not managed to bring forth herself as a new type. In his fantasy, Charles has already begun to forget the real Sarah ("it was hardly Sarah he now thought of") and to remember her only as a symbol of his "extinct freedoms" (262). He "learns" to become an observer, set to watch himself learn how to be the proper husband to his proper wife, etc. The sense of detachment that has in fact already been his problem, now becomes the most he can hope for. And the artificial, shallow, self-deceptive side of the Victorians is preserved; nothing has really changed. But in spite of his imaginary finale, Charles finds himself unwillingly free to choose to see Sarah again after all. In confronting this choice, Charles "had not the benefit of existentialist terminology; but what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom—that is, the realization that one *is* free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror" (267). From the fact that the novel continues on past this realization, we can see that the kind of change under investigation here cannot really be learned

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or taught in any usual sense. It has to do with a kind of experience, and this is why Charles must literally repeat Sarah's story in order to be changed. For this reason the first ending in which Charles sees that "one learned to be what one is" will not do (264).

The path formerly used by Sarah leads Charles to Sarah herself in her room in Exeter. Whereas earlier Charles had been an "enigma" to himself with respect to Sarah (181), once he has been sexually intimate with her, he becomes "infinitely strange" to himself (277). This strangeness admitted, Sarah immediately rejects him with only the vaguest explanation: that she is not worthy of him. In fact, though, she does not know why she has done it. Her action is simply "not to be explained" (279). Having been brought into an ultimate intimacy and then rejected, Charles goes through his great existential realization in the church in Exeter. There, he sees that true freedom implies a kind of ongoing self-crucifixion, an ongoing requirement to make the choice to be authentically free. But unlike Sarah's awareness of all this, Charles's revelation comes distinctly in relation to a sense of historical change. He realizes that "his age" has been the "great hidden enemy" that has deceived him about his true self and further that the age operates as a machine: "without thought, without intention, without malice, because the deception was in its very nature" (285). Thus his conjunction with Sarah has caused him to step beyond his own time: He can now see that previously he "had become, while still alive, as if dead" (285). But in spite of this, he has not yet fully become what Sarah has always already been.

In his wanderings after Sarah has abandoned him, he sees what had been wrong with his revelation in the church: "When he had had his great vision of himself freed from his age, his ancestry and class and country, he had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile" (335). Now he begins to describe himself as Sarah had described herself earlier. He "was the outcast, the not like other men, the result of a decision few could have taken" (335). The difference, again, between his case and Sarah's is that he has *become* an outcast. But in any event, it would appear that Sarah has managed not to be forgotten. And yet until he remembers her as what he most wants but cannot possibly have, she will not be remembered in the right way. The full quality of her newness will not have succeeded in reproducing itself, and thus will not have succeeded in producing, precisely, the late twentieth century. Earlier on, the narrator brings out this paradox. What we know now more acutely than the Victorians, he says, is "that the desire to hold and the desire to enjoy are mutually destructive" (60). Sarah's life in London embodies this knowledge. In the end she has come to "treasure"

loneliness. Marriage is perhaps the greatest institution of holding and enjoying among human beings. But Sarah does not want marriage, because the way that it holds would ruin the pleasure that it ostensibly seeks to guarantee. "I do not want to share my life," she says. "I wish to be what I am, not what a husband . . . must expect me to become in marriage" (353). To this point Charles has not yet grasped this, because there remains the possibility that everything was just a misunderstanding brought on by Sam's treachery. Another meeting must occur before he has fully experienced Sarah's story.

But before considering the final endings, we need to examine the way they are brought to us. Late in the novel a key character appears: the writer. We have seen that the postmodern version of Darwin can explain Sarah's enigmatic nature and her effect on Charles. But how does the idea of the postmodern Darwin come into play with respect to the writer? Natural selection disallows any supernatural causality, but nonetheless natural selection necessarily becomes a version of the prime mover or at least the prime movement, with chance and the environment being the unmotivated movers. As in, for instance, a religious cosmogony, natural selection attempts to tell the whole story, growing into what Daniel Dennett calls a "universal acid: it eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognizable, but transformed in fundamental ways" (63). Fowles's novelist is just such a recognizable but transformed creature.

We read in the famous 13th chapter that it was a "convention universally accepted at the time of [the] story: that the novelist stands next to God" (80). The story told by this God with a capital "G" was of a kind with the anthropocentric Darwin, and conversely, the anthropocentric Darwin was of a kind with this God and its story. As we have seen above, to many Victorians the gradualist, progressive version of natural selection preserved a kind of divine place for humanity. The Victorian novel in its form did much the same, again not necessarily because the writers actually read Darwin. The ideas that Darwin put forth were part of a historical complex of thought, and so as Levine says, we find a "striking mutuality of assumptions" between the kind of story Darwin tells and the kind of story the great Victorian realists tell (8). Even in the late twentieth century, Fowles writes, the "novelist is still a god," though now with a small "g." What "has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing" (82). In fact "freedom" is the first principle now. The author does "not fully control" his creatures because a fully "planned world . . . is a dead world" (81). But on the other hand some sense of determinism is unavoidable: "not even the most aleatory

avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely" (82). The novelist's difficulty is to avoid a deadening determinism in an inevitably planned world. To do so he must preserve the reality of chance. The writer had considered the option of stopping with the "open, the inconclusive ending": Charles would simply ride off to London in search of Sarah. But "the conventions of Victorian fiction . . . allow . . . no place" for such endings (317). So in order to remain true to his Victorian beginning, but to avoid fixing the ending in a conventional teleological manner, he gives two endings. And flips a coin to decide their order of appearance.

This clearly is not the Victorian novel's version of chance, which "is a dramatic expression of the value and ultimate order in nature," always "[suggesting] a designing hand that sets things right" (Levine 137). In the Victorian novel, everything will have necessarily brought about just the one ending. So in spite of the famous Victorian use of coincidence, a strong sense of determinism is hard to avoid. And it is the same kind of determinism that underwrites the teleological, Victorian Darwin. In contrast, Fowles's narrative is of a type with the model of natural selection found in recent Darwinian theory, particularly in Gould's model. With respect to the tendency of Darwinism to swing all the way in one of two polar directions, determinism or randomness, Gould refuses not only the either/or dichotomy but also a synthesis of the two opposites. "I strongly reject," he writes,

any conceptual scheme that places our options on a line, and holds that the only alternative to a pair of extreme positions lies somewhere between them. More fruitful perspectives often require that we step off the line to a site outside the dichotomy. (51)

Gould steps off the polar-oppositional line by invoking contingency, which in his definition is a rather perfectly postmodern paradoxical concept. Contingency "is a thing unto itself, not the titration of determinism by randomness" (51). In standard postmodern fashion, it preserves both randomness and determinism in an unresolvable tension with each other (51). An outcome of his particular position is that our current evolutionary ending may be necessary but is *no more* plausible or necessary than any number of other possible endings. Gould argues that if we could start the history of life over, could somehow replay "life's tape," we would find that "any replay of the tape would lead evolution down a pathway radically different from the road actually taken" (51). No "finale can be specified at the start," he continues, "and none would ever occur a second time in the same way, because any pathway proceeds through thousands of

improbable stages" (51). So again, Gould rejects any history that takes for granted the necessity of a given ending. But Gould hardly wants to put forth the idea "that evolution is senseless" (51) or purely random, which would not be a theory at all. The concept of contingency attempts to include chance without tumbling into the abyss of pure randomness. But of course Gould cannot reverse time's arrow and show us how the same beginning can generate a different ending. Fowles, however, does just this. We have one originating reality leading by chance to two different outcomes. Each outcome retrospectively determines what the nature of Sarah had actually been. And Fowles does this quite seriously. The narrator specifically admonishes that we must not think that either ending "is a less plausible ending" than the other (365). Thus, although my own reading has been drawing toward the final, existential ending, in fact I must agree with John Neary that it is inadequate to see either ending as the "real ending" (174). So the writer himself has been recast as the prime mover in the same way that the prime mover of natural selection has been recast in contemporary Darwinism.

And what of the two endings? In both cases Sarah has finally found a home in which she can "treasure" the kind of self she has always been (353). But in the first of the final endings, she turns out not to have been *even* a hopeful monster. In fact she is only the woman as lovable-enigma archetype who brings Charles fully into the Victorian norm, with God and the nuclear family intact. Instead of Darwin, existentialism, and the postmodern writer, we find that "it had all been in God's hands" from the beginning (God again with the capital) and that Sarah's actions have been "parables" (360). This is as if, in that other great Victorian novel, Estella had turned out all along only to be testing Pip. The positive but again shallow, rosy stereotype of the Victorians is preserved. Nothing fundamental has changed. All the thick weaving of existentialism and Darwinism has been only a threat to an otherwise traditional Victorian story. In the final image the baby cutely bangs her doll on her father's cheek, reminding him "that a thousand violins cloy very rapidly without percussion" (360). This ending, whatever else we may say about it, cloy in the same way.

In the last ending, though, the two threads are sewn tightly together. The last chapter opens with the quote from Martin Gardner's *The Ambidextrous Universe*, in which less than microscopic bits of matter, subatomic particles ("natural radiation"), bring about macroscopic change. And at the same time we meet the next incarnation of the narrator in the novel, who, we read, is "a very minor figure—as minimal, in fact, as a gamma-ray particle" (361). Fowles has brought us fully round to the

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Darwin of the 1960s. This writer takes out his watch and literally turns time back in order for the last ending to occur (362). Now, Sarah turns out to have been the new type, the type who is at home with contingency, uncertainty, and anxiety. Charles leaves the novel changed into a similar kind of being, finally possessing a “celibacy of heart as total as hers” (365), but with a historicized knowledge that she has not had. At the end he faces “the future made present,” as if he has been “reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories” (365) already in place.

What remains to consider is that since Sarah becomes more than a hopeful monster, this must mean that the environment was somehow *already* such that she could possibly succeed. What is the “environment” of other human minds such that we can make this kind of claim about Sarah? Many things may be said here, but with respect to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* what most matters is the fact that a human environment is constituted by consciousness and unconsciousness. Cultural representations always have their conscious aspects: that which a member of the culture actually thinks or says about a given representation. And they always have their unconscious aspects: that which, for instance, ideological analysis uncovers as the latent determinants of the representation, that which must be determining the conscious awareness even though the conscious awareness does not fully know it. Given this, we can see retrospectively that Sarah succeeds because in leading Charles along the trail of her own experience, she has acted, without herself having this conscious intention, as this kind of analyst. In becoming estranged from himself Charles sees that he has heretofore been blind to his own nature (290). This means that he had been a kind of internal outcast, displaced from an authentic sense of self before, only he had not quite known it. But of course, all this only comes to be the case *after* his experience of Sarah. By extension this would be true of the age as a whole, though again we could only know this retrospectively: Certain great Victorian thinkers—Arnold, Tennyson, Hardy—at least at times *now* appear to have been existentialists but without knowing it. And in just this sense Fowles has said of his novel that it shows “an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible” (qtd. in Bradbury 140).

Like all pathways back to the past, Fowles's book must find the present already there. We ourselves must somehow already be “waiting” in the past, or else we have no explanation for how we could be who we think of ourselves as being right now. The difference in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as in the postmodern Darwin, is that we as historical kinds of selves appear by chance. And again, it is this that prevents this story of the evolution of the self from becoming another form of social Darwinism. In

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other words, a likely criticism of my explanation of Sarah might be that she appears as a necessary mutation on the way to the endpoint of the present in the same way that a biological mutation is a necessary mutation on the way to whatever endpoint we choose to discuss. Therefore, the existential self is as programmatically a part of humankind as is a given biological trait. This makes the existential self seem somehow right, somehow what had to be the case. It would follow that other historical types of self along the way have also been right and necessary, such as for instance the kind of self that underwrote imperialism. In fact it would seem to lead to the famous eighteenth-century conclusion that whatever is, is right. But the kind of history told by Fowles and postmodern versions of Darwin requires that no type, not *even* a biological type, is right or necessary in this way. In fact Fowles shows the emergence of a generic kind of self-consciousness in much the same way that Foucault shows the emergence of an episteme and that Kuhn shows the emergence of a scientific paradigm. As with so many postmodern concepts, the linearity of time no longer holds in any straightforward sense, and so judgments of historical necessity become difficult to make. As even Dennett stresses, retrospectivity "is a point about the objective property" of being a new evolutionary event: it is not just an aspect of "our epistemic limitations" (96). It is only true *now* that the appearance of a self such as Sarah must have been necessary: It was not necessary at the time. The question of the rightness of an event in this context becomes even more difficult. How, given my interpretation, can we describe the existential self as an "improvement" or as "progress"? What would it be progress toward? It may be movement onward, but "toward" always implies a telos, and this idea of a telos we have seen to be an anthropocentric illusion. The most we can say is that since a type succeeded, then it must have been right enough for that environment at that time. But if we include an awareness of chance, then, really, we can only say that the one actuality must have been the lucky winner from some finite but indeterminate realm of possibilities.

Inevitably, our Darwin, like the Victorian Darwin, both upsets and consoles. The Victorian Darwin meant the crushing loss of any supernatural human preeminence, but the comforting discovery of a kind of natural preeminence. With the contemporary Darwin, we lose any satisfactory version of even a natural preeminence. Consequently, the Victorian Darwin now seems "pre-lapsarian" (Conradi 60), and so we look back nostalgically upon Charles (before Sarah) as the quaintly naive believer in the "immensely reassuring orderliness in existence" that Darwin supposedly gave in exchange for making us "only" animals (Fowles 45).

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Contemporary evolutionists feel this loss and try to salvage a positive view of human existence from the anthropocentric wreckage. The rescue they offer typically involves a redefinition of our uniqueness and some sense of hope. According to Gould, who sounds distinctly existentialist about this, though we are ultimately random events in time, nonetheless we are "the offspring of history, and must establish our own paths in this most diverse and interesting of conceivable universes—one indifferent to our suffering, and therefore offering us maximal freedom to thrive, or to fail, in our own chosen way" (323). Dennett ends his book asking whether, after the "universal solvent" of Darwinian theory has done its job, there remains "something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred. . . . What remains is more than enough to build on" (520–21). Charles has found, in the same paradoxical way as both our theorists, "an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness on which to build" a more authentic existence (366). In all three cases our uniqueness remains, but it looks rather monstrous in relation to the supernatural or anthropocentric explanations about ourselves that we most favor. And only a very uncertain hope may be derived from this uniqueness. Sounds familiar. The conclusion, it appears, must be that our era itself is the time of the hopeful monster.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For other discussions of Darwinism in the novel see Conradi 75, Tarbox 79–80, Huffaker ch. 4, Fawcner ch. 5–6, Salami 124–25, Wolfe ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Both Dawkins and Dennett argue against Gould's claims (Dawkins ch. 9, Dennett ch. 10). Interestingly enough, while Gould attributes the Darwinism of Dawkins and Dennett to anthropocentrism, Dennett in his turn says much the same of Gould. Dennett admits chance, but he, like Dawkins, still finds a gradual process of change necessary to any legitimately scientific idea of natural selection. Given this, he defines Gould's punctuated equilibrium as a kind of "skyhook," a more or less magical means of getting around Darwinian necessities. Both sides of course accuse each other of misapprehending what the other has in fact said.

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