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Desire Under the Eucalyptus: Evolution in *The Way of All Flesh*

Samuel Butler is known primarily as the author of Erewhon and as a Lamarckian evolutionist. Since Darwinian evolution has carried the field and the Lamarckians and Creative Evolutionists, such as Butler, Bergson, and Shaw, have lost the battle, there has been relatively little scholarly interest in Butler's theory of evolution as it pertains to his novels, particularly his autobiographical *bildungsroman* *The Way of All Flesh*. A first step towards correcting this deficiency would be to look at the role that evolutionary theory and doctrine play in the narrative of *The Way of All Flesh* and to examine how the evolutionary metaphor dominates the novel.

The novel opens not with the birth of Ernest Pontifex, Butler's *alter ego* and protagonist but with a description of his great-grandfather. Old Mr. Pontifex is described as having learned to draw and in a curious passage the narrator, Overton, comments,

*I wonder how they will actually cease and come to an end as drawings, and into what new phases of being they will then enter.*¹

Drawings are not ordinarily thought of as having an end and entering into new phases of being. The emphasis here is not on the drawings but on the process of change by which one thing becomes transformed into another. A little later on Old Mr. Pontifex is described as being a musician, a builder and a player of organs (*Way*, 5–6) talents that will reappear in Ernest Pontifex three generations later.

In this passage, which opens the novel, two key ideas are already encapsulated, the idea of development and change and the idea of heredity. Butler's concept of heredity was not one of straight descent but, as we shall see, one that envisioned leaps over generations in the passing on of talents and abilities.

Heredity, however, is not merely a deterministic flow of characteristics from parent to child, it is also a matter of chance, or as Butler puts it, of Fortune. Speaking of Fortune Butler says:

Her blindness is the merest fable; she can espy her favourites long before they are born. *We are as days and have had our parents for our yesterdays...* (*Way*, 20. Italics mine).

¹ Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, (New York: New American Library, 1960), 5. Italics mine. All future references are to this edition and are cited by page in the text. Unless otherwise indicated all italics in the Butler quotations are mine.

The child and the parent are continuous; they are one until such time as the child leaves the parent either as a spermatozoon or as a fully developed fetus. Butler, through Overton, suggests that the “weak place in George Pontifex’s armour” comes from not having had great wealth earlier in the family; that it is necessary for the enjoyment of great wealth to be part of the “transmitted education of some generations” (*Way*, 21).

In a passage of Thomas Huxley’s from “The Origin of Species,” an essay written in 1860, he speaks of the inheritance of a mutated characteristic, having six fingers or toes, and comments:

In these instances, therefore, the variety, as it were, leaped over one generation to reproduce itself in full force in the next.²

We see in Butler’s comments the idea that the emergence of a new type must be preceded by a period of fallowness in which the organism gathers energy for a new leap to a higher level.

Butler here establishes the heredity out of which Ernest comes and lays the groundwork for the emergence in Ernest of characteristics that were in his great-grandfather and that will reappear in him. The comments on evolution, rather than being detachable *aperçus*, become the locus of much that is of interest in the novel. They parallel the narrative development and suggest in various ways the central theme of the novel, that of Ernest’s development from an embryonic stage to a fully developed person, and in portraying Ernest’s ontogeny they suggest a racial phylogeny that will be dependent on the inheritance of certain characteristics.

When Theobald gives his first sermon we are told:

He showed that so far as geology was worth anything at all—and he was too liberal entirely to pooh-pooh it—it confirmed the absolutely historical character of the Mosaic account of the Creation as given in Genesis. Any phenomena which at first sight appeared to make against this view were only partial phenomena and broke down upon investigation. (*Way*, 40–41).

Butler has introduced the geological and theological controversies that were raging at the time, the mid to late 1820’s, and characterized Theobald at one stroke. His picture makes it appear that Theobald has a rather self-satisfied opinion of himself.³

² Thomas H. Huxley, *Darwiniana*, (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1908), 38.

³ Consider for example this statement about Cardinal Wiseman “In 1835, he collected his studies over the years in series of lectures *On the Connexion between Science and Revealed Religion* which

This is Theobald's first, and only, involvement with intellectual currents outside of evangelicalism.

Theobald's stodginess and backwardness in accepting or even considering the opinions of science might seem to hold out no promise for Ernest but Butler suggests that everything is contained within its opposite. The narrator, in commenting on the death of George Pontifex says:

There is no useful virtue which has not some alloy of vice, and hardly any vice, if any, which carries not with it a little dash of virtue....(80)

The emphasis here is on process, but it should be noted that Butler, through Overton, suggests that everything is contained within its opposite.

It is possible then for something different to arise from Theobald, something different from either him or George. Ernest, up to the time he is put in prison for his attempted rape, is largely a younger version of Theobald. Like Theobald he is forced to enter the clergy against his will and like Theobald he makes an abortive attempt to rebel against his father's dominance. It is not until he is put in prison that he has the strength to rebel against the traits that Theobald and Christina have passed on to him.

Butler appears to take seriously the idea of a man's children being a continuation of himself so that the result is that we are all the more or less exact reproductions of our ancestors. As Georg Roppen remarks:

If it be granted, moreover, that growth and reproduction is a process of memory, then the total history of life appears in a new light. It reveals how organisms have been able to vary, how, in fact, evolution has been a creative and advancing process....⁴

Theobald's dislike of children, which is commented on immediately after this, will certainly be inherited by Ernest who finds an ingenious method of ridding himself of his children by putting them out to a congenial couple and managing to pay them relatively infrequent visits.

It is when Ernest is sent to school that we find Butler enunciating a central principle of his creed. It is a characteristic of man, or indeed of any highly evolved species, Butler argues, that much that is done is done unconsciously. He constructs

were so advanced that as late as 1860, the distinguished English scientist, Sir Richard Owen, believed they could easily be supplemented in order to bring them up to date. (J. Derek Holmes, *More Roman than Rome: English Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1978) 55.

⁴ Roppen, 334.

an imaginary dialogue between the “dumb Ernest” (dumb in this context meaning mute) and the conscious Ernest. The “dumb Ernest” says:

This conscious self of yours, Ernest, is a prig begotten of prigs and trained of priggishness....Obey *me* [italics Butler's], your true self....I, Ernest, am the God who made you. (122–123)

This emphasis on the unconscious self and the idea that the natural processes of growth depend on the attention of the self, even though in an unconscious manner are linked to Butler's views on evolution. If an organism can do something it must have learned how to do it. The passage from *The Way of All Flesh* is parallel to another passage from Butler, from *Life and Habit*, in which he reflects on this very point and contends that a day old baby has a *practical* knowledge of pneumatics, hydrostatics, optics and acoustics.

The unconscious self is not just the psychological unconscious as it is for Freud, but the biological unconscious, the cellular mechanisms that know how to grow bone and muscle and how to oxygenate the blood without knowing that oxygen exists. When Ernest listens to the unconscious self, as he does when he leaves prison, he listens to his true self, and in this process he ceases to replicate the experience of Theobald, ceases to be the embryo, and becomes the real Ernest.

The intellectual crux of the novel comes at the opening of Chapter 47 when Overton says “It must be remembered that the year 1858 was the last of a term during which the peace of the Church of England was singularly unbroken”(190).

The publication of *The Origin of Species* did as much to shatter the old faith as did the development of the Higher Criticism. Thomas Huxley in an 1859 essay “The Darwinian Hypothesis” recapitulates the geological evidence and the current version of the evolutionary hypothesis. Huxley asks if the truths of the Pentateuch are scientific as well as moral and answers that many believe that:

the writer of the Pentateuch was empowered and commissioned to teach us scientific as well as other truth, that the account we find there of the creation of living things is simply and literally correct, and that anything which seems to contradict it is, by the nature of the case, false.⁵

This is precisely the position taken by Theobald in his first sermon.⁶ The horrified reaction to Darwin, at least as depicted by Huxley, can be seen in an other

⁵ Huxley, *Darwiniana*, 9–10.

⁶ See p. 4 above.

essay, written a year later, “The Origin of Species,” in which he refers to the “pietists”, “bigots”, and “old ladies of both sexes”. Huxley goes on to denounce the theory of special creation and points out that it is just as inconsistent “with the Hebrew view as any other hypothesis”, at least as that view is “at present maintained by men of science.” Ultimately the doctrine of special creation is “a mere specious mask for our ignorance.”⁷

The cause of this hostile reaction on the part of the clerical audience, and the intellectual, if not the emotional, reason for Butler’s rejection of Darwinism, can be found in Darwin’s rejection of teleology. Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes this when he says:

The most perceptive theological critics of the evolutionary philosophy recognized that...its most devastating consequence lay rather in its implications for Christian eschatology and teleology and for the biblical picture of human destiny....Without teleology it was impossible to understand “what is meant by the fact that the supernatural works of God are dispensed by fixed laws.”⁸

Pelikan also quotes from Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* to the effect that if the purpose is removed, “teleology, and therefore mind, or God, is expressly banished from the world”.⁹

Butler’s belief in a purpose to evolution, in the play of the cards rather than in the mere dealing of them, and in Lamarckism leads to a different destiny for Ernest than he would have had at the hands of a determinist, such as Zola. This is one of the hallmarks of Lamarckism, as interpreted by Butler, the belief in the power of the will to effect changes in the living organism and for these changes to be passed on to succeeding generations.

Lamarck had stated something like this doctrine in his *Recherches sur l’organisation des corps vivans* of 1801 in his example of the crane that *wishes* to avoid immersing its body in liquid¹⁰ and in his later example of the giraffe, which

⁷ Huxley, *Darwiniana*, 22, 54, 58.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 216. The passage in quotes is from Horace Bushnell’s *Nature and the Supernatural, as Together Constituting the One System of God* of 1858.

⁹ Pelikan, 216. Pelikan is quoting from a 1981 reprint. He does not give a date for the nineteenth century original.

¹⁰ See Richard W. Burkhardt’s introductory essay “The Zoological Philosophy of J. B. Lamarck”, in J. B. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Elliot, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xxx. Hereafter this translation and the ancillary material are simply referenced as Lamarck and followed by the page number. Burkhardt is at pains to point out that the wading bird passage, which is not quoted here, is actually the source

because of its feeding habits stretches its neck, given in the *Zoological Philosophy* of 1809.¹¹

Habit, for Lamarck and for his disciple Butler, was to become the means of the acquisition of organs. Habits are acquired by use or disuse, that is to say that one acquires an organ through trying to do something, and this results in an organic adaptation that becomes a new organ.¹²

If this is true, we should expect to see it carried out in some fashion in the realm of plot in Butler's novel. That is to say that, if the novel is shaped by an evolutionary hypothesis, it should show up not in the acquisition of a new organ by Ernest but by the acquisition of a new habit. This habit will necessarily be shown in the psychology of Ernest, so that even though he is in a sense a continuation of Theobald and Christina, he can begin to differentiate himself from his parents. This difference will come about when he listens to the unconscious or true self referred to earlier.¹³

When Ernest greets Mr. Shaw, the freethinker, with his admiration for Whateley's *Historic Doubts*, he is taken aback by Mr. Shaw's witty comment. Butler uses a Lamarckian image here when he has Ernest ask himself why the clever people in Cambridge had not come up with the same answer.

The answer is easy: they did not develop it for the same reason that a hen had never developed webbed feet—that is to say, because they did not want to do so; but this was before the days of Evolution, and Ernest could not as yet know anything of the great principle that underlies it. (240)

The principle of evolution here is not natural selection but wishing, desiring; this is what Butler refers to as the great principle that underlies evolution. The seed planted by Mr. Shaw results in Ernest going to the British Museum Reading Room to read *Vestiges of Creation*.

Ernest is so stunned by his encounters with Mr. Shaw and with Chambers' book that he fails "to realize the change which was coming over him. In each case the momentum of old habits carried him forward in the old direction"(242). The

of the the charge that Lamarck believed that animals could *will* changes. The giraffe passage is quoted here because it is somewhat more famous, in fact it furnishes an image for Shaw's preface to *Back to Methuselah*, and because it refers to the title of this paper.

It should be noted that Lamarck attributed the will to the higher animals, such as man, and that the emphasis on will is neo-Lamarckian. See the discussion of will in *Zoological Philosophy* (Lamarck, 355-61).

¹¹ Lamarck, 122.

¹² Lamarck, xxix.

¹³ See the discussion on p. 7 *et sequelae*.

key word here is *habit*. It is Ernest's intellectual habits that are undergoing a change, and with them his psychological habits as well. Ernest has up to this point been a mere embryo, in fact a relatively undeveloped embryo, almost, in fact, a blastoderm.

When Ernest is imprisoned for his attempted rape/seduction of Miss Maitland, Overton sees Theobald and tells him of his son's plight. Following this interview he reflects on pre- and post-natal accidents and concludes that:

Accidents which occur for the first time, and belong to the period since a man's last birth, are not, as a general rule, so permanent in their effects, though of course they may sometimes be so. (255)

The phrase "a man's last birth" refers not to reincarnation but to Butler's belief that a man, or any organism, is a continuous entity and that death represents merely a stage in his transformation from one being to another. This parallels the passage about the drawings quoted earlier.¹⁴ The passage also runs parallel to one from Butler's essay of 1890 "The Deadlock in Darwinism":

I will endeavour to show that, though heredity and habit based on memory go about in different dresses, yet if we catch them separately - - for they are never seen together -- and strip them there is not a mole nor strawberry-mark nor trick nor leer of the one, but we find in the other also.¹⁵

These passages echo Butler's earlier comments on heredity¹⁶ Ernest is in fact a continuation of his father but while his father did not rebel against George Pontifex's "will shaking" and became a clergyman, Ernest, by virtue of the accident of his attempted rape upon Miss Maitland, is forced to look upon himself as he really is. It is in this confrontation with his own doubts, doubts occasioned by his encounter with the deceptive Pryer, the freethinking Mr. Shaw, and the frustrated powers of his own emotions and sexuality that Ernest can begin to dissociate himself from his parents.

Heredity is for Butler a determinant of behavior, but unlike Zola's deterministic theorizing his people are not solely determined by the influence of heredity and environment.¹⁷ Ernest can change his destiny by an act of the will and Overton, upon Ernest's release from prison, points out "the rapidity with which development

¹⁴ See p. 1 above.

¹⁵ Samuel Butler, "The Deadlock in Darwinism", *The Essential Samuel Butler*, ed. G. D. H. Cole, (New York: E. P. Dutton, n.d.) 396–97

¹⁶ See the passages discussed on pages 2–3, 6 and 11 above

¹⁷ See Zola's comments in "The Experimental Novel" pages 173, 178–79, 184 *et passim*.

follows misfortune, if the sufferer is young and of a sound temperament". (272) Immediately following this is a passage in which Butler refers to fortune, as he had earlier, but he discusses it in terms that are reminiscent of his views on evolution and on the contrast between the evolutionary views of Charles and Erasmus Darwin.

A man is not to be sneered at for having a trump card in his hand; he is only to be sneered at if he plays his trump card badly. (273)

Butler had used this image of card playing in one of his evolutionary tracts. He accuses Charles Darwin and Wallace of attributing everything to chance and comments:

According to Messrs. Darwin and Wallace, we may have evolution, but are on no account to have it as mainly due to intelligent effort, guided by ever higher and higher range of sensations, perceptions and ideas. We are to set it down to the shuffling of the cards, or the throwing of the dice without the play, and this will never stand.

According to the older men, cards did indeed count for much, but play counted for more.¹⁸

Butler attributes Ernest's situation to chance but it should be noted that chance has left him a fortune, in the inheritance left him by his aunt, and that it is up to Ernest to use it in a beneficial fashion.

When Ernest leaves prison Butler has a number of comments on the process of accommodation between the "changed and unchanged selves" and the "changed and unchanged surroundings". The successful being accommodates the "internal and external changes" There is, however, no difference between the internal and external, subject and object are one. Butler recognizes this as absurd and illogical but suggests that one must learn to live with this absurdity. Faith becomes the ultimate arbiter.¹⁹ As Butler ultimately says:

The just shall live by faith, that is to say that sensible people will get through life by rule of thumb as they may interpret it most conveniently without asking too many questions for conscience' sake. (281)

Butler is convinced that it is habit, use or disuse, that accounts for heredity and for the eventual development of organs.

¹⁸ Butler, *Essential*, 364.

¹⁹ Butler, *Way*, 280-81.

Having thus established the general proposition, I will proceed to the more particular one -- that habits, involving use and disuse of special organs, with the modifications of structure thereby engendered, produce also an effect upon offspring, which, though seldom perceptible as regards structure in a single, or even in several generations, is nevertheless capable of being accumulated in successive generation till it amounts to specific and generic difference.²⁰

Butler returns to the influence of the environment when he calls poverty “a quasi-embryonic condition, through which a man had better pass if he is to hold his later developments securely” (319) and to his theory of effort in his image of the fly on the top of a cup of coffee. The “supermuscan effort” may result in the fly experiencing an “increase in moral and physical power which might even descend in some measure to his offspring”. (330) These passages parallel and symbolize Ernest’s attempts to find a trade for himself, first as a tailor and later as a writer, and Ernest’s relationships with people. The fly serves as a metaphor for Ernest’s entanglement in the social world. His involvement with people that he admired would have, in Butler’s view, resulted in Ernest modifying his views to the extent of putting on a mask and tying his tongue. Butler acknowledges that the fly would not have gotten “the increased moral power if he could have helped it, and he will not knowingly alight upon another cup of hot coffee”. (330)

The second reference, that of the fly, striving through “supermuscan effort” to liberate itself from the hot coffee, concretizes the ideas of habit and effort that are involved in the Lamarckian view of evolution. The fly’s attempts at liberation result in an adaptation, an acquisition, that affects its somatoplasm and hence its germplasm.²¹ Ernest’s attempts to liberate himself from the influence of the social world which, like the hot coffee surrounding and threatening the fly, surrounds and threatens him, must in some measure cause an adaptation in Ernest, an adaptation that can be passed on to his future offspring.

The embryonic imagery returns again when Ernest encounters his son Georgie and finds that his son dislikes school as much as he did. As he and Overton leave the bargeman’s residence Ernest launches into a homily comparing the “embryonic stages” that young people go through with their money to the embryonic stages they go through in developing their limbs. (361) These passages serve as metaphors that control and reflect the development of the character of

²⁰ Butler, *Essential*, 376-77.

²¹ See the discussion on pages 7, 12-13 above. It should be noted that modern evolutionary theory holds that there is a barrier between the somatoplasm and the germplasm. See Hull’s essay “Lamarck Among the Anglos” (Lamarck, xl-lxvi).

Ernest. Ernest is at this point able to look back on his earlier self and see retrospectively the course that his development has taken and to see it as the stages of embryonic development that preceded his ultimate birth.

The process of differentiating Ernest from his parents by means of the depiction of his individual evolution is almost complete when Theobald dies. Ernest has, in Overton's and in Butler's view, become more alive as he rebels against the values that were presented to him by Theobald and Christina. It is in this process of rebellion that Ernest discovers himself, when he listens for the first time to the "unconscious self" described earlier. The evolutionary doctrine that is espoused by Butler actually overlays the novel and controls the way in which the characters, particularly Ernest are presented. The evolutionary passages form a dominant metaphor for Ernest's development so that the primary doctrines that Butler has espoused as part of his evolutionary creed are exemplified in various ways in the novel.

In sum then Butler has used the metaphor of evolution to show the possibility of individual evolution, or individuation. The emotional and psychological evolution of Ernest is parallel to the biological comments that Butler gives throughout the novel. The comments then become more than detachable *aperçus* through the way in which the metaphor dominates the novel and Ernest becomes a symbol of the possibility of psychological as well as biological evolution. It is through this use of evolution as the dominant motif of the novel that Butler organizes the narrative and imposes a shape on it so that it ceases to be a *bildungsroman*, and becomes a symbol of personal development and liberation and a source of inspiration for later writers such as Bernard Shaw, who will echo the passage of Ernest's jailing in *Fanny's First Play*, and will use Butler's evolutionary ideas in *Back to Methuselah*. While Butler's ideas on evolution have been largely discarded, the novel that these ideas shaped has proven to have an influence that extends beyond its immediate intellectual environment, and Butler did find an audience, in the younger generation, that was more willing to listen to him.

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