Ábrán on Griffiths, 'The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins'

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Devin Griffiths’s The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins is a fascinating read, though it can also be a difficult one. While coming from comparative literature, the book can be read from the perspective of works in the social sciences and philosophy aligned with new materialism, nonhuman agency, multispecies ethnography, or other approaches that discuss the relationality, agency, or intentionality between and of living and nonliving entities. The book is a particularly exciting read for those interested in the history of science or in historiography in general, as it analyzes literary methods for introducing new kinds of knowledge, actors, entities, and intentions within historical thinking and writing. Moreover, Griffiths himself uses such modes of writing to tangle together a web of writers, writings, and historical scientific and literary methods and thinking. The reader can, therefore, follow Griffiths’s analysis through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century (British) literary and scientific writers as they introduce new possible (human and nonhuman) actors, ways of acting, and intention into historical thinking. This raises the intriguing possibility of disassembling what “Western ideology” or “Western thinking” might mean, because through the writings analyzed in the book we get a different Western perspective to a rigid dichotomy between (Western, white, male) humans and (other) humans, humans and nonhumans, living and nonliving. The book could have benefited from simplification and less use of new materialist theories, as Griffiths’s own theoretical approach works better within the beautiful and detailed historical and literary analysis. Nevertheless, it is well worth reading it, both to understand in detail how language was and can be used to create new knowledge and understand new entities and ways of acting, and to follow the same method in the writing of the book itself.

Griffiths sets out to follow “literary modes and historical procedures” that “constitute a new technology for writing about past events and thinking about their complex relations to present experience” through the “shared commitment to analogy” (p. 2). He follows these techniques of understanding the past, which he also calls comparatism and comparative historicism, through a mixture of science and literary writings, the two often intermingling, in the works of Erasmus Darwin, Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, and finally Charles Darwin. Although he uses the writings of these five to tease out the way they used analogies to understand and showcase new modes of history and histories, they represent only nodes within networks of other scientists, authors,
events, and texts. It is thus that he talks about the nineteenth-century descriptive science as participating in a “collective authorship,” emphasizing “the intimate relationship between descriptive science and the printing industry, both scientific and literary,” recognizing “the world of print to scientific networks of fact and observation” (p. 9). Throughout the book, we are to recognize that this specific “collective authorship” of literary and scientific writing—this network of literary and scientific authors reading each other and learning from each other’s techniques and ways of writing the past—creates comparative historicism. Comparative historicism in Griffiths’s analysis is shown not only to emerge from this relationality, but the works themselves also engage in a way of writing and thinking about history that brings into focus different kinds of agents and agentiality apart of (certain kinds of) human agents. Thus, “the interrelation of literary forms … may disclose the interrelation of actors (both human and nonhuman) in history” (p. 49). It is both the relations the analyzed authors and works are participating in and the kind of relationality that these works engage in that make this book particularly intriguing.

After an introduction and a prelude, each chapter deals separately with the works of the five authors, their techniques of how past events relate to present ones, and their use of analogy. The chapters seem to build on each other as the analyzed authors use techniques or works from previously considered authors and the number and kinds of actors or relations brought into historical thinking multiply. Griffiths gives a minute, complex analysis of each author’s texts, ways of writing, use of comparisons and analogies, and ways these relate to the theories and ways of writing of other authors and philosophers. These are beautiful albeit complicated analyses for those of us not yet comfortable with literary analysis. A second or third read may be needed to understand its full value. The two main aspects of Griffiths’s argument throughout the book are cleverly brought out in chapter 1, which presentsErasmus Darwin’s works. The shift in perspective in thinking about history that Griffiths observes in nineteenth-century Britain (and parts of Europe) is done through, on the one hand, the bringing together of literary imagination and scientific discovery, and on the other, the bringing together, through analogy, of society and nature. Griffiths shows how the works of Darwin “mark a turning point in the use of analogy,” arguing “for a pattern of universal progress that is based on analogies drawn between society and nature.” While this universalistic process of Darwin’s view of history will be criticized later on, along with other critiques of his writing, Griffiths teases out the overlooked importance of Darwin’s work that collapsed “poetic allegories into more immediate analogies that tie human experience to nature’s organization” (p. 53). Thus a “more basic insight into the analogy between all life” is given, providing “a new understanding of analogy itself” (pp. 53-54).

The novel way Erasmus Darwin uses analogy, argues Griffiths, “forges connections that do not hold the objects of concern apart … or differ their relation in time … but, rather, work to bring the objects of comparison into intimate and transformational contact” (p. 54). It is this kind of analogy that in the prelude Griffiths defines as harmonic analogy as opposed to formal analogy. While formal analogy uses a known pattern to a new context, in a top-down, directional way, harmonic analogy explores “a pattern between two different sets of relationships, to see what common features the pattern picks out” (p. 36). A formal analogy works within the same paradigm to pick out similar patterns or exceptions. In contrast, through a harmonic analogy we can imagine new patterns and arrive at a new understanding about the world because it allows two sets of relationships, otherwise held apart, to play off each other. To go further in his conceptualization of harmonic analogy, in the prelude Griffiths turns toward speculative realism and flat ontology (especially Manuel DeLanda and some Bruno Latour). He does this to show that harmonic analogy has the power to look symmetrically,
the sense of nonhierarchically, at two sets of relationships, neither being the point of reference as it would be with formal analogy. Within harmonic analogy the different sets of relations in the world are ontologically equal and not hierarchical as it would be the case within formal analogy, thus teasing out new understandings of the world. Through harmonic analogy then, literary language becomes a method “to grasp the world” (p. 40). In this, Griffiths criticizes the view of speculative realism “that vernacular language, and particularly literary language, obscures the world.” While keeping the idea of flattening the connection of the different sets of relations brought together by analogy, he argues that “imaginative language, and particularly analogy, helps us engage the world and its history,” changing “how both historians and scientists access the past” (p. 39).

To return to Erasmus Darwin, Griffiths shows that by drawing a connection between “poetic composition and scientific research,” Darwin reformulates the otherwise static natural order presented in the Linnaean system of taxonomy “as a process in time, imputing a history to Linnaeus’s ‘sexual system’” (pp. 58, 56). Griffiths's minute analysis demonstrates how Darwin plays with poetic conventions (both in structure and theme) and scientific knowledge. In The Loves of the Plants, Darwin’s work becomes fascinating because it creates a scientific argument about both the temporality and the artifice of botanical classifications through poetic structures that also bring together human and plant sexualities.[1] Through this, Darwin “naturalized artificial taxonomies by suggesting that they helped describe a history of hybridization and descent,” which “fertilized the cosmos” (p. 79). Next, in The Botanic Garden (The Economy of Vegetation and Zoonomia), Darwin extended his understanding of temporality and historicity to a model of universal evolution by drawing on various contemporary theories (p. 63).[2] This achieves a “larger thesis about evolutionary development, an extended argument for a world in continuous and progressive flux” (p. 79). Darwin used analogy to gain scientific insight and develop new scientific theories by drawing different relational patterns, be it plant and human love or “a complex amalgam of stadial history and scientific theorizing” together (p. 56). The novelty of Darwin’s work was that he flattened “strict hierarchies of knowledge—between science and poetry, between word and thing—into a more continuous plane of historical play” thus verging “upon the kind of levelled understanding that is central to comparative historicism” (p. 82). However, he failed to take the flattening exercise of harmonic analogy far enough because he clung to an analogy of unitary evolution.

Chapter 2 answers the failing of Darwin through the works of Walter Scott. Whereas Darwin tried to work toward a “universal analogy of progress, Scott articulated an uncertain network of analogies ... that exposed modernity as a tense and uneven composite,” “producing an understanding of the past as a network of relationships” (pp. 88, 123). Opposing a linear Enlightenment history with distinct periods of time, “protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men,” Scott practiced a “‘history from below’ that emphasized the relation between ordinary life and national events, drawing attention to both the particular and the humanity of the past” (p. 84). Scott was not alone in his attempt to change the way past and present relates to one another, and Griffiths places him within a range of thinkers and disciplines that “were providing a more complex, nuanced understanding of social change than previously available” (p. 87). The novelty of Scott’s way of writing history was that he populated it with as many new entities as possible, be it flesh and blood, not abstracted, humans, objects, or languages. He did this through the materialist vision of antiquarianism, “enriching and making more complex the network of things and people that could be said to figure in the past” (p. 102). Scott, as a “kind of forger” and translator of language, allowed himself not to reconstruct history as it was but rather give an essence of the past that those in the present could understand (p.
103). His contemporary readers of the historical novel could then have a sense of grasping the past as one that they could engage with, allowing them the “experience of alterity in general” (p. 121). As the engagement with the past became “deformalized,” Scott’s novels opened up “the possibility that history could be and should be different,” showing how history “depends on the violent exclusion of alternative histories” (pp. 123, 125, 124). Drawing a harmonic (flattening) analogy between past and present (or other epochs) through the translation and forgery of language, objects, and people, Scott made the past reachable from the present while also destabilized its certainty and universality.

The next chapter, on Alfred Tennyson’s elegy In Memoriam, is an interesting one as the elegy tried to bring life and afterlife, the living and the dead together through exploring the possibility of co-authorship between Tennyson and his dead friend, Arthur Henry Hallam.[3] At the beginning of the chapter it seems uncertain how it fits into the larger book altogether, nevertheless as Tennyson mobilized contemporary scientific theories, astronomy for instance, “to give the afterlife a material claim in the poem” and explored the plurality of worlds and the uncertainty of knowledge, he used analogy to flatten the relation between life and death (p. 151). However, Griffiths argues, by the end of the poem, Tennyson failed to sustain the “pluralizing spirit of the poem” sustaining “multiple possibilities” and pressed these multiple possibilities “into a singular, strident vision” (p. 157). This effort of collapsing diversity into unity, however, was not particular to Tennyson but one that contemporary naturalists were actively aiming for. These naturalists “responded to the plurality of natural forms by arguing for transcendent principles of order and development,” comparisons and analogy being “at the center of hot debates over the meaning of geology, the antiquity of the human race, and our relation to animal species” (pp. 157, 158). Because “the poem overwrites the differential implications of comparative historicism with a single, capacious history, a vision of total incorporation,” it cannot be viewed as a work of comparative historicism, argues Griffiths, but it has its merit in testing “the limit of analogy as a strategy for pattern analysis” (pp. 163-64, 165).

While In Memoriam goes too far with comparison and ultimately washes “out the particularities” between two (or more) sets of relations, George Eliot in chapter 4 is shown to have explored multiple ways of using analogy to examine diverse sets of relations between diverse actors. She then explored both analogy and the errors of analogy, understandings and misunderstandings, mistranslations, incomparabilities, and inabilities to translate in order to create a realistic history through comparative analysis. Analogy’s role in Eliot’s writing is that it allowed “similarity to extend through sentences (and in time), resonating between individuals, incidents, objects, and, most importantly, narratives” creating a realism that “is about relationships, between things, between people, between people and things, both within the novel and beyond.” This realistic history, however, was not a knowable, single patterned linear history, but one that could only be “partially glimpsed” through “fragments of life” (p. 183). However, even such fragments could be easily misconstrued, dissonance and uncertainty were prevalent, and common seeming patterns could be as much the results “of independent responses to similar conditions as evidence of a common pattern” (p. 171). Alternative perspectives often arose from Eliot’s historical comparison that play “against each other, emphasizes disjunction, and unsettles the conceit of a more traditional and more coherent history” (p. 178). Thanks to Eliot herself, this is possibly the most enjoyable chapter of the book, as we can follow how Eliot drew intricate lines between minutely analyzed social relations, mundane experiences, and historical patterns. Comparisons between social relations and historical patterns, between individual, social, and biological worlds go back and forth, as they leverage “analogy’s power to flatten formal modes of historical characterization (including both metaphor and metonymy) into opportunities of contact,
engagement, and recognition” (p. 183). It is this ability of comparison and analogy and “their ability to diagnose previous errors” that produces new knowledge (p. 167).

Eliot, argues Griffiths, used comparative historicism as a “critical check to confident generalization” (p. 209). In this, she critiqued the work of Charles Darwin, who, although using comparatism as a critical method too, “was more hopeful of its productive capacities—it’s ability to generate new insights that were generally valid, rather than specific to particular moments of encounter” (p. 209). The last chapter, chapter 5, then, on the works of Charles Darwin uses comparative historicism “to articulate a new understanding of natural relations, and the patterns that organized species development” through language and writing itself (p. 209). If with literary writers, Griffiths analyzes the way their interest in the sciences entangled with their writing, while often influencing the natural sciences, in the case of Darwin, Griffiths shows us the centrality of Darwin’s writing and imaginative language, as well as his reading of historical fiction and literature, to the formation of his theories. Darwin thus “recognize[d] the productive relationship between imaginative labor and the extension of knowledge” (p. 211). Darwin used comparative historicism to “study how different actors and distinct narratives interact in history.” Griffiths guides the reader through an exciting analysis of how Darwin grappled with the “basic problem of agency” and intent (p. 213). At times it seems that Darwin managed to diffuse agency and intent across relations between different entities, such as orchids and bees, while at other times he employed the concept of “nature” or “natural selection” to shortcut for this diffusion of agency. In any case, it is through the entangled relationship and co-evolution of orchids and bees that “in their sensitive interaction with their environment, in the interspecies relationships they cultivate, afforded Darwin a powerful model for sociability of ecologies and of life in general” (p. 243). To this comes Erasmus Darwin’s anthropomorphism, which helped create a “sense of deep entanglement, speculating on the relation between plant and animal life, and insisting on the continuities between all living things,” allowing Charles Darwin to “recognize the continuities between orchid, animal, and human,” “their capacity to engage us, and so to communicate their nature and help write Darwinian science” (pp. 239-240, 243).

The previous chapters on writers and their techniques of using comparatism and analogy help constitute Darwinian natural selection where human and nonhuman lives intertwine throughout a long history of activity that makes up an ecological history. As each author kept adding different actors and kinds of relations to historical thinking, so Darwin turned “from the singular organic form toward ecological histories—toward the relation between beings and over time” undermining “the distinct status of human reasoning” (p. 247). It is exciting to read more about collaboration and cooperation than competition in Darwin’s work on how organisms interact with each other. It seems that such collaboration (between orchids and bees, for instance) is mirrored in the way Darwin brought together and bridged ways of working and writing through “well-entrenched divisions between naturalist and layman, between merchant, enthusiast, and expert” (p. 243). Perhaps it is this that makes the book a particularly hard read, because it tries to do the same. As it draws lines between techniques of writing, use of analogy and comparatism I interpret it as intending to mirror Darwin’s analysis of “the relation between different flowers and moths over time.” While this latter “makes it possible to understand how organisms read each other’s history,” Griffiths’s book makes it possible to understand how literary, scientific, philosophic, and other influences on each other led to a comparative historicism, a way of thinking that influenced Darwin’s work (p. 248).

Nevertheless, Griffiths’s way of writing, which is exciting in the way it draws on the techniques it
describes and analysis to bring together a vast relationality of authorships, techniques of writing, and techniques of thinking, also mostly leaves the task of disentangling these to the reader. He explains that “by emphasizing the deeply social nature of authorship, its filiation with the collaborative nature of scientific inquiry, and the continuity between social and natural life, I hope to recognize the value of intent, the intents of authors as well as those of other human and nonhuman agents, in understanding how books work” (pp. 254-55). I found I often lost sight of the book’s purpose: Is it about how analogy is used to lead their users to new ideas? Does it disclose new forms and patterns? Is it about how literary and scientific works and techniques intertwine and influence each other? Is it about the birth of comparative historicism, and how it reformed the engagement with the past of several thinkers? Is it about how literary forms can help understand social and natural history? Is it about agency and intent as it is distributed across networks? Or is it about the analogy between science and literature? No wonder that the book needs both an introduction and a prelude! The intriguing distinction between harmonic and formal analogy gets lost within everything else, and the reader almost wishes that Griffiths did not try to bring in object-oriented ontology or Latour every now and then. I think Griffiths could have been more selective in the audiences he hoped to bring along, an admittedly difficult choice to make, especially if one is as committed to the productivity of plurality as Griffiths seems to be. Griffiths’s book adds to those who grapple with relationality, agency, and intention as distributed across networks, and human and nonhuman relations and their co-constitution throughout history, but it could stand well within its own historical and literary analysis, which are exceptionally well researched.

Arguably the book is most immediately rewarding to read if one starts with the two-page “Coda: Climate Science and the ‘No-Analog Future.’” In this, the author expresses his hope that analogy can make us understand the past and develop “models that interpret our present condition and address our future experience” thus leading to the ability to find new patterns and new solutions in an increasingly unsure (no-analog) future. “In studying our own place within this larger world, and the modes of being we share with other forms of life, we may find new ways to adapt and cope,” explains Griffiths as the larger possible purpose of the book (p. 259). This book is not the only one that addresses concerns of climate change through a relational agential ontology. Indigenous theories of nonhuman agency, for instance, have been “working out specific performative and ethical implications of agent ontologies on their own terms,” as often the survival of indigenous groups would depend on it.[4] Most works on new materialism, posthumanism, relationality, or nonhuman agency deal with and to some extent emerge from the concerns of environmentalism, climate change, and the Anthropocene, as those educated in “Western ideas” realize that “there is no cure for the condition of belonging to the world.”[5]

In this sense, Griffiths’s book is exciting because it puts “Western ideas” into a different light. For instance, Tim Ingold calls for a “radically alternative biology,” because a relational view of the organism (as in organism in the environment) is against a neo-Darwinian theory, but what is a neo-Darwinian theory if we re-analyze Darwin through Griffiths’s analogical lens?[6] Perhaps the question is whether there is need for more Eurocentric justification of departure from our “inherited humanist ontologies” “that distracts from the more substantive work of shaping productive ontological relations with a world full of human and nonhuman agents”?[7] But what if, as we could argue through Griffiths, our “humanist ontologies” are not that straightforwardly inherited? How come Darwinian biology often means competition rather than the intricate co-working of bees and orchids? There is perhaps a need to re-analyze what Eurocentrism and “Western ideas” really mean or indeed
where they come from.

Notes


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