

THIERRY HOQUET, *Revisiting the Origin of Species: The Other Darwins*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018, xi + 240 pp., \$140 (\$49.55 paperback).

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Thierry Hoquet has spent a fair part of his career thinking about Charles Darwin. This is his second book on Darwin; he has written many articles and book chapters; he has translated the *Origin of Species* into French. It is thus striking that he opens his most recent dispatch with the admission that, when he began to read deeply into the secondary literature on Darwin, he was forced to conclude that he “did not know who ‘Darwin’ was” or “what ‘Darwinism’ meant” (p. 1). It turns out that he intends this remark not as a confession, but as a manifesto. In *Revisiting the Origin of Species: The Other Darwins*, Hoquet repudiates attempts to discover what Darwin ‘really’ meant, what Darwinism ‘really’ is. Any such attempt, Hoquet argues, imposes a false coherence on Darwin, a coherence at war with the richness and ambiguity of his thought.

Hoquet takes as his subject not Darwin the man, nor even Darwin the author, but “Darwin-the-texts” (e.g., p. 213), specifically the six editions of the *Origin of Species* published during Darwin’s lifetime. But even within these narrow limits, Hoquet locates a Darwin alive with interpretive possibilities. The *Origin*, Hoquet claims, embodies “a plurality of meanings and references” (p. 3)—indeed, it can “be read through a prism that separates several distinct Darwins” (p. 72). Further, the *Origin* invites readers to make of it what they will. It is “infested with ambiguities”

that allow different readers “to claim the Origin as their own and find in it support for their own theoretical projects” (p. 213). The goal of the book, then, is to limn the outlines of the plurality of Darwins Hoquet believes are immanent in the Origin.

In Part I, Hoquet explores the Darwin with whom we are most familiar. The most common reading of Origin takes it to be, as Darwin himself once called it, “one long argument”, focused on establishing that natural selection is the preeminent cause of evolutionary change. (Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, London, John Murray, 1859, p. 459.) Without denying that there is plenty of support in the text of the Origin for such a reading, Hoquet nevertheless wants us to take seriously aspects of the Origin that seem “sometimes to undermine the centrality of natural selection” (p. 7). In Part II, Hoquet focuses on one of the most important of those aspects: as much as the Origin is a study of natural selection, it is also an inquiry into the sources of the variations on which natural selection acts. Darwin believed that variations could arise due to the behavior of organisms and then be inherited by their offspring, and he was to that extent a ‘Lamarckian’. But as Hoquet shows, there is more to Darwin’s theories of variation than a simple ratification of Lamarckian inheritance. Part II thus examines Darwin as a theorist of variation. In Part III, Hoquet considers Darwin as ‘cosmologist’. Although Darwin disclaimed any metaphysical pretensions, many of his contemporaries understood the Origin to have provided the foundations from which a new metaphysics could be fashioned. In the end, Hoquet claims, there are many different Darwins, each associated with a different reading of the Origin, “each more or less faithful to the originator’s thought, each ultimately as monstrous as the other” (p. 17).

Hoquet's philippic against those who would read Darwin as an uncompromising selectionist is entirely persuasive. Although he is certainly not the first to make such a case, two features of his analysis stand out. The first is his chapter on the six editions of the *Origin* published during Darwin's lifetime (pp. 23–45). Ernst Mayr chose Darwin's first edition as the source for his facsimile edition published in 1964, arguing that it "represents Darwin in his most revolutionary spirit". For Mayr, natural selection is the *Origin*'s polestar. Any time Darwin decentered natural selection, he was hedging, exhibiting a failure of nerve, and this weakness was "aggravated in later editions" (Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition*, edited by Ernst Mayr, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964, p. xxiv.). Mayr's preference for the first edition has since calcified into orthodoxy, and few non-specialists have ever encountered the *Origin* in anything other than its first edition. Hoquet's efforts to recover and emphasize how the changes to the various editions of the *Origin* cast light on the evolution of Darwin's thinking are salutary.

Hoquet also devotes a chapter (pp. 46–71) to parsing the full title of Darwin's treatise: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. By examining each part of the title through the lens of the choices translators made in rendering Darwin's title into other languages, Hoquet vividly captures the wide range of possible meanings contained in a title that on its face seems perfectly straightforward. He is particularly persuasive in his repudiation of those (and they are legion) who have indicted Darwin for failing to fulfill his title's promise that he would offer a theory of the origin of species. Focusing on German, Hoquet notes that origin can

be translated as *Ursprung* (a source or originating point) or as *Entstehung* (the process by which something comes to be). Darwin did not provide a theory of the point from which all species originate (*Ursprung*)—indeed he explicitly refused to speculate on that subject. But he assuredly did offer a theory of the process by which a new species comes to be from an existing lineage (*Entstehung*) (pp. 51–52). Hoquet’s appreciation of the centrality of process thinking to Darwin’s project is as discerning as it is welcome.

In this respect in particular, Hoquet’s book should prove of interest beyond the narrow confines of the Darwin industry. His project of “diffracting Darwin’s title [through] the prism of translations” (p. 46) prompts us to consider translations of scientific texts not only for how they bring those texts to new audiences in different linguistic and cultural settings, but also for how they open up interpretive possibilities for what we might understand the text to mean in the language of its creation.

I must confess an ambivalence about Hoquet’s choice to visualize his thesis in the form of a group portrait of a “plurality” of different Darwins, each equally “true” (p. 218), and about his conception that each different Darwinian legacy is in some sense equally “faithful” to its original, and equally “monstrous” (p. 17). Hoquet is surely right that Darwin’s thought is complex and ambiguous. And he is surely right, too, in counseling that we resist the temptation to imagine a spurious unity growing out of such exuberantly fertile soil.

Yet, what are we to make of different Darwins Hoquet presents in his group portrait? Each of Hoquet’s Darwins embodies one single aspect of Darwin’s thought to the exclusion of all others. His “Darwin-the-Selectionist” defends the

primacy of natural selection to the point of zealotry. His “Darwin-the-Lamarckian” sees nothing but the inheritance of acquired characters. His “Darwin-the-Epicurean” sees variation as entirely random, while his “Darwin-the-Teleologist” takes what even Hoquet describes as “quite improbable paths” to put purpose at the center of Darwin’s thought (p. 114).

With rare exceptions, you would be hard pressed to find any of these versions of Darwin in current scholarship. Yet, it would be facile, I think, to characterize them as straw men, set up only to be knocked down. Rather, Hoquet seems to see this assemblage of univocal Darwins as having heuristic value: even if they are “misinterpretations, ... they still hold interest as interpretive prisms” (p. 114). He seems to conceive of each of these caricatures as an ideal type, intended not to capture the subtleties of any particular scholar’s reading of the Origin, but to sharpen and so make more perspicuous the differences between the various interpretive possibilities that are immanent in the book. By this means, Hoquet reminds us that we cannot expect any single portrait—however carefully conceived and skillfully executed—to capture fully the complexities, the ambiguities, even the contradictions, of Darwin’s thought.

But this reminder comes at a cost. Even if Hoquet is right that any attempt to characterize the core ideas animating Darwin’s thought risks imposing on them a false coherence, that does not require us to accept that all portraits of Darwin are equally “true”, and equally “monstrous”. The best scholarship on Darwin, at least, paints considerably subtler portraits than the ideal types pictured by Hoquet. I would venture that some of these portraits are more revealing than others. And some bring out aspects of Darwin’s work that had not previously been sufficiently

appreciated, thus enlarging our insight into his thought. Indeed, if Hoquet's book is successful, and I think it is, it is successful as much for the sharpness of his depiction of Darwin's thought as it is for his admonition that any such depiction must inevitably be partial and imperfect.