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DARWINIAN TRAUMA IN MODERN NATURAL HISTORY NOVEL: GRAHAM SWIFT'S "EVER AFTER"

The article investigates the specificity of postmodern comprehension of ideas and consequences of the so-called Darwinian revolution by a contemporary Neo-Victorian novel. With Lyotard's concept of incredulity towards metanarrative taken as a philosophical background, gradual transformations of Darwinian epistemology and receptive modes have been traced in Graham Swift's novel "Ever After". Special attention has been paid to the novel's key binary oppositions' disintegration both on structural and conceptual levels.

Key words: Darwinism, neo-Victorian novel, "natural history novel", metanarrative, postmodern sensibility, epistemic uncertainty.

Problem statement. As one of the most influential discourses shaped and developed during XIX century (with the very word "scientist" coined by Whewell no sooner than 1832 [7, p. 214]), the Victorian concept of science has been constantly referred to by modern historical fiction. Within the last 20 years, radical cultural shift of mid-XIX century caused by revolutionary evolution of natural sciences has been reconstructed and critically re-interpreted in A. Byatt's "Possession", P. Lively's "City of the Mind", J. Diski's "Monkey's Uncle", L. Jenzen's "Ark Baby", T. Holland's "The Bone Hunter" etc. With such a vast variety of scientifically oriented neo-Victorian novels in view, a new term, the "natural history novel", has been introduced by Sally Shuttleworth for a number of texts dealing exclusively with the consequences of post-Darwinian spiritual crisis [8, p. 253].

While Darwin's impact on Victorian novel in terms of epistemology, ideology and metaphoric constructs has been thoroughly investigated in a number of fundamental critical works (L. Stephenson's "Darwin among Poets", D. Bush's "Science and English Poetry", L. Hencin's "Darwinism in English Novel of 1870–1910"), the reasons for Darwinian renaissance in contemporary fiction have yet to be explained. This article would particularly dwell upon Lyotard's concept of incredulity towards metanarrative [5] aiming to distinguish the specificity of post-modern interpretations of Darwinism in Graham Swift's Neo-Victorian novel "Ever After" (1992).

Recent research and publications analysis. What Shuttleworth calls "the explosive growth

of the Darwin industry in recent years" [8, p. 254] is a multi-dimensional and complicated process aimed but partially at developing a "more finely grained understanding of the relationship between Darwin's ideas and those of his contemporaries" [9, p. 219], or at discussing "the history of evolutionary thought" in order to conceptualize "our current understanding of evolutionary biology" [6, p. 628–629]. Starting from 1970s, plenty of biographers, historians and academics struggled, as Browne points out, to represent Darwin "fully embedded in his social and cultural context... dealing less with the details of science and more with the cultural features that create a science" [1, p. 371–372]. Within the context of fictional Darwiniana, Irwin Stone's «The Origin: A Biographical Novel of Charles Darwin» provides a good sample of such an approach, alongside with R. Mc Donald's «Mr. Darwin's Shooter» (1999), N. Dreyson's «Confessing a Murder» or J. Darnton's «The Darwin Conspiracy» (2005).

Further to the above-stated tendency, A. Byatt's "Angels and Insects" and Graham Swift's "Ever After", both dated 1992, broaden historical and cultural perspective of Darwinism by focusing on prompt and long-range effects of the so-called crisis of 1859 when Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" was published.

Shuttleworth stresses similarities in some of the plot elements of these two works: both novels feature a male protagonist who is a naturalist and follower of Darwin and who finds himself fundamentally at odds with his clergyman father-in-law [8, p. 255]. Another evident parallel between

the two novels is the fact that both protagonists fall victim to their scientific devotion ending up with ruined families and self-imposed exile.

Basic ideas presentation. Still, what serves as a keystone to Byatt's plot, might seem a bridging plot device in Swift's *Ever After*: the narrator of the novel, a retired scholar Bill Unwin, investigates his Victorian ancestor's secession from the Church in search of the way out of his own existential crisis caused by the death of his wife. As the epigraph from Virgil's "Aeneid" ("...et mentem mortalia tangunt", I) alludes, Unwin would invoke the ghost of his ancestor, Matthew Pierce, both to find explanation for his own existence ("Why the things matter?" is the question he repeatedly asks himself) and to solve a painful Ignorance/Knowledge dichotomy knowledge he would constantly refer to when pondering upon his own life.

Though the beginning of Matthew Pierce's fall (what he himself would call "the moment of my unbelief" and at the same time "the beginning of my make-belief" [10, p. 112]) dates back to pre-Darwinian times of 1844, when he encounters a half-buried ichthyosaurus while on post-graduation holiday in Lyme Regis, it is the untimely death of his ironically named son Felix that sets this irreversible process forth and confirms the devastated father in his vision of the overwhelming randomness of things. As a result, Pearce starts gradually questioning biblical and natural theology in terms of creationism, teleology and human significance in the world in front of his father-in-law, the vicar of local church. Darwin's work catalyzes the final break, when Pearce assaults the believer with natural selection's capacity for producing design without a designer. Having confronted both his father-in-law and his wife who rejects his atheism, Pearce splits from his family and sets on to the New World, leaving his confessionary notebooks to posterity.

The reasons for re-writing the story of Science vs Religion conflict that has been told many times before, not least in the Victorian age itself (the implications of a "development without teleology", as G. Levine points out, started to impinge on the consciousness of G. Elliot and T. Hardy [4]), can be rooted, as J. Glendening suggests, in "the power of modernity, especially as driven by science and technology, to provoke crises of faith in individual's self-worth that religion, still on some level a felt human need, is understood to no longer address" [2, p. 74]. Christian Gutleben views the representation of Darwinian crisis as a starting

point and a justification for contemporary fiction to register instances of further crises, especially the loss of faith in men [3, p. 207]. Last but not the least, Shuttleworth brings forth a revolutionary idea that current upsurge of interest in the spiritual consequences of Darwinian revolution might turn out to be "a displacement of current fears concerning the indivisibility of man and machine onto the no longer threatening relationship between human and animal life" [8, p. 259]. Having pointed out Swift's preoccupation with the end of history through a nuclear explosion, she suggests that in times when all human measure of temporality is at threat, "the Darwinian order... takes on a reassuring, almost sentimental appeal" [8, p. 259].

Though the narrator, Bill Unwin, does confess that "it's hard to see the bombshell which tore apart Matthew's life and horrified Victorian society" [10, p. 288] in the sober stodge of Darwin's writing, the functions of explicit parallels between nuclear weapons and Darwinian revolution in the novel cannot be limited to a nostalgic fleur. Certainly, Swift is not the first writer to link nuclear weapons creation and scientific revolutions of the past. John Fowles' famous comparison of our "living with the bomb" to the Victorians living with the theory of evolution immediately comes into mind, alongside Bertolt Brecht's "Life of Galileo" with its powerful message of scientist's social awareness and responsibility.

In Swift's novel, however, the narrator focuses rather on spiritual consequences of Darwinian revolution: "So did he want fame? Was it important, after all, that it was his name on the bombshell? He always maintained that he worked only for elucidation of truth. Did he reflect on the desirability of the elucidation of truth? Did he consider what the effect might be on lesser mortals (was he some greater mortal?) like Matthew Pearce?.. Reading Darwin, you sometimes get the feeling that the man was – dim. It was not his business to settle questions of final causes; it was his business only to elucidate the truth" [10, p. 289].

By raising a question of Darwin's responsibility for a post-1859 existential crisis, Swift disputes the Victorian concept of true scientist crystallized in Darwin's "Autobiography" and still quite influential in popular culture [8, p. 254]. First published in 1877, "Autobiography" has been henceforth generally regarded as a canon of a scientist's "hagiography" as well as demonstrating Victorian approach to the matter of scientific objectivity, which refers to a general post-modern problem of interpretational relativity.

Among the Victorian scientists, Darwin wasn't the first to ponder upon the true scientist's personality and its impact upon the results of research. In their letters and works, such prominent scholars as W. Clifford, T. Huxley and J. Tyndall unanimously pointed out modesty, candor and academicism as antidotes against possible distortion of the Truth. "The first condition of success is patient industry, and honest receptivity, and a willingness to abandon all preconceived notions, however cherished, if they be found to contradict the truth. – Tyndall writes. – And if a man be not capable of this self-renunciation – this loyal surrender of himself to Nature and to fact, he lacks, in my opinion, the first mark of a true philosopher» [4, p. 76]. Yet, it was Darwin's outline of his own life that canonized an image of scientist as a self-sacrificing, self-denying and dedicated person whose behavior is defined not by "false" social conventions but by far more important principles of agnosticism and empiricism. The very sense of life for such a person lies in self-abnegating devotion to Science, the latter being perceived as a sort of "religion of doubt" based upon a cult of objective truth and verified knowledge [4, p. 82].

Such an overwhelming appeal to the Absolute Truth (as opposed to the Absolute Love – "Amor Vincit Omnia" was meant to be the motto of Pearce family) results in a sort of emotional austerity marked down by Darwin with truly scientific pedantry. "There is a passage in the latter, – Bill Unwin writes while musing on Darwin's "Autobiography", – where the author laments the gradual loss of all taste for poetry, likewise, virtually, for music, painting and fine scenery, and speculates (ever the man of science) on what has caused the atrophy of the relevant parts of the brain" [10, p. 292]. Such transformation has much in common with religious asceticism which, taken into consideration Darwin's own metaphor of science as a religion and Pearce's somewhat fanatical behavior, hints at implicit similarities between science and religion for a Victorian mind.

Based on the above, both paradigms as represented in the novel can be identified via Lyotard's concept of metanarrative – a comprehensive explanation, a narrative about narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge, which legitimizes society through the anticipated completion of (as yet unrealized) master idea [5]. Actually, in Matthew Pearce's case Darwin's work would acquire the functions of metanarrative by offering explanations for all Pearce had found inexplicable from a religious standpoint. Years after, in Bill

Unwin's time, Darwinian epistemology seems to have lost its comprehensive explanatory power: "If natural selection had had its nasty way, – Unwin writes ironically, referring to the mankind as "an endangered and thus protected species", – we should had been wiped long ago, a fragile, etiolated experiment" [10, p. 33].

In contrast to his ancestor, Unwin feels the susceptibility of the totalizing nature of Darwinian metanarrative and tries to "localize" it by introducing differentiation between Darwin the man and Darwin the textual construct: "These great men of ideas, they get turned themselves into ideas. So Darwin becomes a kind of abstract condition, a sort of irrevocable tinge that settled on the world around the middle of the nineteenth century. The world before Darwin, the world after Darwin. Who thinks of Darwin the man? Was he a man or a mind?" [10, p. 293].

Unwin's reflections upon Darwin's motives, works and diaries often contradicting each other in terms of truth and happiness finally bring him up to understanding the "make-believe" nature of any image, theory or Weltanschauung model based on absolute categories. What looked to Matthew Pearce as true/false controversy (i.e. Science vs Religion conflict) would stand out for his descendant as merely the process of substitution of one metanarrative by another. Unwin's tragedy as a bearer of postmodern sensibility lies, therefore, in his inability to construct his own substitute to what is lost: from the very structure of his text it is clearly visible that, whatever organizing principle (genre model, compositional structure, style or method) he tries, it falls prey to inner controversies.

Swift would expose the make-believe nature of scientific narrative by comparing Unwin's scholarly manner to that of his rival, Michael Potter's, who claims "the spiritual crisis of the mid-nineteenth century" to be "his subject" [10, p. 118] and looks forward to seizing Pearce's diaries from Unwin to conduct his own research. Years ago Potter's scientific career fell victim to somewhat like Darwin-Wallace standoff, his subject of interest being intercepted and published by another scholar, which might have totally changed Potter's vision of science as a quest for Truth and therefore forced him to overcome what Darwin might have called "a beneficial mutation". While Unwin and his kin may be regarded as disadvantaged members of the species doomed to die out (if not physically, then metaphysically), Potter's adaptive potential is rather high. Described as a true expert in make-be-

lieve, capable of keeping up the illusion of happy family and cheating his wife for years, he has every chance to succeed where Unwin fails, i.e. to structuralize the ever-disintegrating material and controversial material into fake resemblance of a system.

Conclusions. Thus, having positioned Darwinian vision of science, scientist and the world as an epitome of corresponding Victorian metanarrative and a sort of “new religion” bound to an eschatological finale, Swift subsequently deconstructs its constructive binary oppositions, i.e. scientific method vs religious belief, ratio vs intuition, objective truth vs subjective insight, determinism vs occasionalism to explicate inner controversies underpinning the scientific Weltanschauung and to demonstrate its immanent incapability of structuring the chaos. Being incorporated into a newly born natural history novel tradition, Swift’s “Ever After” challenges the Victorian metanarrative of science not only to problematize the relations of postmodern troubled conscience with the XIX century’s ideological legacy, but to reconsider the far-reaching consequences of the Darwinian trauma yet to be explored by modern Neo-Victorian studies.

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Тупахіна О. В. Дарвіністська травма в сучасному «природничо-історичному романі» Грема Свіфта «Ever After»

Специфіка постмодерністської рецепції ідей та наслідків так званої «дарвіністської революції» середини XIX ст. розглядається у статті на матеріалі одного з найбільш показових «природничо-історичних романів» порубіжжя XX-XXI ст. – «Ever After» Грема Свіфта. Послідовні трансформації дарвіністської епістемології та віддзеркалюючих її рецептивних стратегій висвітлюються з оглядом на концепцію «кризи віри в метанаративи» Ж.-Ф.Ліотара. Особливу увагу приділяється деконструкції бінарних опозицій, що конституують вікторіанський метанаратив наук, як на формальному, так і на змістовному рівнях організації тексту.

Ключові слова: дарвінізм, неовікторіанський роман, «природничо-історичний роман», метанаратив, постмодерністська чутливість, епістемологічна невпевненість.

Тупахіна Е. В. Дарвинистская травма в современном «естественно-историческом романе»: «Ever After» Грэма Свифта

Специфика постмодернистской рецепции идей и последствий так называемой «дарвинистской революции» середины XIX в. рассматривается в статье на материале одного из наиболее показательных «естественно-исторических романов» рубежа XX-XXI вв. – «Ever After» Грэма Свифта. Последовательные трансформации дарвинистской эпистемологии и отражающих ее рецептивных стратегий изучаются в свете концепции «кризиса веры в метанаративы» Ж.-Ф.Ліотара. Особое внимание уделяется деконструкции бинарных оппозиций, конституирующих викторианский метанарратив науки как на формальном, так и на содержательном уровнях организации текста.

Ключевые слова: дарвинизм, неовикторианский роман, «естественно-исторический роман», метанарратив, постмодернистская чувствительность, эпистемологическая неуверенность.