



Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2013, 510-514
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Gómez, Leila. *Darwinism in Argentina: Major Texts 1845-1909*.
Translated by Nicholas Ford Callaway. Lewisburg: Bucknell
University Press, October 2011.

The Narrative Power of Science: Darwinism and Literature in Argentina

Adriana Novoa

University of South Florida

The work of Charles Darwin was extremely important in nineteenth-century Latin America. Argentina was no exception; it is in this country where Darwinian ideas constituted what Marcelo Montserrat calls the “ideology of progress.”¹ In fact, by the second half of the nineteenth century there was no aspect of the country’s cultural and scientific life that

¹ Montserrat, Marcelo, *La mentalidad evolucionista en la Argentina: Una ideología del progreso* (Victoria, Pcia. de Buenos Aires: Universidad de San Andrés, 1997).

was not related to a Darwinian, or pseudo-Darwinian, logic. The texts bequeathed by this era fall into two categories. On one hand, there are the works of writers and even scientists who wrote fiction, such as Leopoldo Lugones and Carlos O. Bunge. On the other hand, there are strictly scientific works written by Argentine Darwinians that have been forgotten or dismissed by contemporary scientists. This book aims at studying the first category. As such, Leila Gómez's introduction pays careful attention to ideas that traveled from science to Argentine culture at large.

This book was originally published in Spanish, and was expanded in this edition, including more authors, and a revised introduction and explanation of each of the selections. The original edition was a welcome addition to the prolific field of travel narrative analysis, given Darwin's own travel narratives, and his emergence as a key figure for those who were part of the "generación del ochenta."² The English edition "documents the actual controversy underlying the fictional feud between Darwinists and anti-Darwinists in Eduardo Holmberg's novel, *Two Parties in Conflict* (*Dos partidos en lucha*, 1875)."³ Gómez makes a wonderful contribution to the understanding of the abiding interest of scientists in writing, and how their fictional narratives represented a dynamic of mounting importance in the 1870s. She also includes the works of Darwinian scientists who used the power of scientific narratives to address social and political concerns. In order to evaluate the merits of this book we need to divide its analysis into three parts. First, we need to take into account how the introduction frames the included readings, and helps the reader understand the relevance of this material; second, we need to pay attention to the criteria for selection; finally, the most important task is to determine if the translations do a good job of capturing the complexity of writing about science in Argentina from the 1870s through the 1910s.

The introduction defines a clear purpose for the book, which is to understand the complicated web of Holmberg's *Dos partidos en lucha*. Since Gómez is a literary critic, the reasoning binding diverse texts together

² Gómez, Leila. *La piedra del escándalo: Darwin en Argentina, 1845-1909* (Buenos Aires: Simurg, 2008).

³ Gómez, Leila. *Darwinism in Argentina: Major Texts (1845-1909)* (Lanham, Md: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 1.

draws on Roberto González Echeverría's work on myth and archive.⁴ Thus, the selected texts all "sought to appropriate Darwin as a scientist-traveler in hopes that his theoretical perspective would explain that 'Otherness' [Echeverría's "Other Within"] and help [the elites] with the task of building a nation" (Gómez, *Darwinism*, 4). The introduction also explains the three-part structure of the book. The first part deals with the historical record on the first Argentines to have contact with Darwin before 1859, including William Henry Hudson, possibly one of the first Argentine readers of the first edition of *Origin of Species*, and Francisco J. Muñiz, one of Darwin's Argentine correspondents during the research that ultimately gave rise to his revolutionary book. The second part deals with thinkers whose ideas were transformed by Darwin, and includes writings by Sarmiento, Ameghino, Moreno, Holmberg, Burmeister, Lugones, Estrada, and Alberdi. The title of this section, "Scientific Fantasies," is dedicated to the intersection between fiction and fact, and science and literature in the works of all the authors included except for Burmeister, Ameghino, and Moreno. But even in the case of Ameghino and Moreno, we discover that their narratives are hardly devoid of literary qualities. Ameghino's "Visión y Realidad," for example, can be analyzed as an example of scientific fantasy. The third part deals with the impact that Darwin had on the study of Argentine culture at large. Bunge, Ramos Mejía, and Ingenieros are the authors covered in this final section.

The logic of these three sections seems perfectly appropriate for the book's stated objectives, and the latter are clearly reinforced in each of the three introductions that contextualize the readings selected. Gómez does an impressive job of synthesizing the main connections in the readings, particularly from a political and institutional perspective. There is no analysis of the authors' evolutionary views, or contextualization of the historical transformation of evolutionary science that these works capture, which it is not a problem since the book is more interested in the way in which Darwinian ideas helped to define Argentina's political culture. The variety of topics, clearly explained by Gómez, responds to this large context

⁴ Roberto González, Echeverría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

provided by the readings. For example, Bunge's short stories, such as "La Sirena," qualify perfectly as "scientific fantasies," while Sarmiento's lecture on Darwin clearly exemplifies his dilemma of using evolutionary ideas to reinforce a particular notion of social evolution. Gómez's choices are impeccable. The second section is perhaps the most perfectly organized, since all the topics are articulated around the relationships of various other texts to Holmberg's *Dos partidos en lucha*, which provides an excellent structure.

The translation of texts written at the end of the nineteenth century about science is an extremely complicated task. Translating Sarmiento's lecture on Darwin, for example, can be maddening if we consider all the various digressions, contradictions, and misrepresentations he included in order to avoid explaining the state of confusion and disarray that characterized scientific debates by the 1880s. Sarmiento's expression of support for Spencer, for example, is a clear example, for the Spencerian system he defended stood in manifest contradiction to many of Darwin's ideas. The same can be said for Holmberg's lecture on Darwin, also included in this volume. These examples illustrate the excellent job that Nicholas Ford Hallaway did in his translations. Reading the original writings in Spanish in itself requires something very like a translation in order to make sense of many of their claims. However, while this book is no critical edition, it is clear that the translator made an incredible effort to clarify the nuances of every concept, and tried to pay attention to each author's particular style. The result is a narrative that is fluid and clear, but also very close to the intended meaning of the authors. For those who would like to teach the material in class, this book is an indispensable tool that will prove accessible to undergraduate and graduate students alike. The flawless movement from text to text also speaks to Hallaway's contribution to creating the unity that Gómez announced in her introduction. We can travel through the ideas introduced by her without much effort, recognizing the three central concerns that organize this compilation.

Finally, it is important to note that this book is primarily for those who already have an understanding of the period, and of the authors

included. Explanations of the scientific trajectory of these texts are not included, so a certain degree of specialized expertise is required for the reader to fully appreciate Gómez's work. The lack of more detailed biographical information for each of the authors included, or of an accounting of their relationship with Darwin, is perhaps the biggest bar for the uninitiated. This is a crucial issue, since Alberdi's approach to science is not the same as Florentino Ameghino's or Octavio Bunge's. Therefore, this book is a perfect fit for those who already have an understanding of Argentina in the second half of the nineteenth century and require complete textual evidence of the impact that Darwinian ideas had in this Southern Cone country. Analyzed from this point of view, this is an excellent introduction to the main authors who wrote about this topic from different perspectives. Leila Gómez has produced a book that fits very nicely with the works recently published on science in Latin America.⁵

⁵ Jens Andermann, *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); Marcelo Montserrat and Jens Andermann, *La ciencia en la Argentina entre siglos: textos, contextos e instituciones* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2000); Irina Podgorny and Maria Margaret Lopes, *El desierto en una vitrina: museos e historia natural en la Argentina, 1810-1890* (Mexico, D.F.: LIMUSA, 2008); Irina Podgorny, Marta Penhos, and Pedro Navarro Floria, *Viajes: espacios y cuerpos en la Argentina del siglo XIX y comienzos del XX* (Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2009); Irina Podgorny, *El argentino despertar de las faunas y de las gentes prehistóricas: coleccionistas, estudiosos, museos y universidad en la creación del patrimonio paleontológico y arqueológico nacional (1875-1913)* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2000); Julia Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Adriana Novoa and Alex Levine, *From Man to Ape: Darwinism in Argentina, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Alex Levine, and Adriana Novoa, *¡Darwinistas!: The Construction of Evolutionary Thought in Nineteenth-century Argentina* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).