

like an intelligible elucidation of its principles - In the perusal of the original work I failed to catch the Author's spirit and got tired of the book long before I got to the end of it, but whether the fault lay with the incomprehensibility of the matter or the heavy, obscure style of the writer is not for me to determine; but of this I am certain that I have seldom read a book with less interest and I know that in this I am not singular, several of my friends having made the same complaint a fault which probably, to some extent, accounts for the floundering of reviewers who have jumped to conclusions, skipping I fear, in some cases, the bigger half of the book in doing so. But in truth readers can scarcely be much blamed if the fault lies altogether at their door for it is no easy matter at once to grasp the great ideas embodied in a volume the result of 20 years study and reflection on ^{an} all absorbing subject.

The perusal of your masterly review of both the book and its successors

Grazing Lodge Reading 2nd March
1861.

My Dear Sir

I feel at a loss how to begin this letter for I have been so long reproaching myself for not writing that to tell the honest truth I somehow feel ashamed to do so.

Each successive receipt of some useful contribution from your pen and clear head - of which I have many to acknowledge, has elicited fresh resolutions of amendment but only like their predecessors to be broken! Having at length however got my pen fairly in hand albeit now getting old and rusty I shall hope still to be able to make it finish this letter at all events and then I shall live in hope for future ones. The matter (to continue the metaphor) which has at length stirred its sluggish energies was the perusal of your Capital

"Examination of Darwin's Treatise" one
one of the most brilliant ~~more~~ ^{more} essays
I have read for a long time - A copy
of it reached me a few days ago
forwarded by Mr Darwin himself, at
least "C Darwin" was inscribed on
the corner of the envelope - I had heard
of the review before from our good
Excellent friend Ward - Who by the
way was spending a week with me
here for the benefit of his health when the
brochure arrived - but had not seen
it. That no time in reading it and
have been ever since, I think now nearly
a fortnight turning the subject over
I over again in my mind, every
now I have having a fresh look at some
of the points which attracted my at-
tention at first, some with increasing
appreciation but others - What shall I
say? that I repudiate them or rather confess
that I do not understand them they go so
far beyond my ^{in my word} ~~view~~ ^{the} ~~view~~ ^{careers} at
last becomes metaphysical and I have
no head for metaphysics; in truth these

metaphysical days are not suited
to such mental wanderings - The time
has been when learned men endowed
with more imagination than sound sense
wrote big books to prove how many
Angels could dance on the point of a
needle but happily those days are
long gone by and my own feeling
is one of deep sorrow that Darwin
should have gone so much out of his
depth as to bring up a metaphysical
question utterly beyond the reach of
human reason with us every day
natural history - And yet I don't think
I should say I am sorry perhaps I should
rather rejoice considering the way he
has done it for in truth it is one that has
always been floating among us driven
first one way then another according
to the fancies of each man who touched
on its consideration. But be that as it
may, let me beg of you to accept my
most cordial thanks for the pleasure and
satisfaction I have derived from your
exposition of the theory which is the only
one I have seen which seems to give
any thing

have ^{hitherto} supposed but neither so notable as
the 'Theory' requires. It seems to me to be
asking too much to require a man to
believe that the infusoria & megatharum
both spring from the same primordial
form or forms! but not ^{so} to ask him to suppose
that the creator should impart varying
powers to numerous forms. Indeed
in a discussion, based so entirely on con-
jecture as this is, (or valuation not having
condescended to throw light on such mys-
terious operations, the knowledge of which
does not concern salvation) it seems
to me the more probable solution of
the two and less startling than to suppose
that the ^{one} vital germ should have in itself
not merely the power to increase and multi-
= ply, in the manner now daily passing
before our eyes, but that it should bit
by bit throw off changing & rechanging
forms in the endless succession now
stored in the collections of naturalists.

This, if I correctly understand the theory
or doctrine of derivation and Natural Se-
lection, is what it is presumed, if not ex-
= pressly, at all events mainly, to effect,
it being the ^{that selection} means of modification".

has tended to remove many fibres
from my mental eye and enabled
me to perceive various beauties in
the Theory previously overlooked but
sparsely, ~~has~~ not enabled me accept the
summing in the last page of the book.

To the working naturalist the Theory
will I anticipate prove of inestimable
value by inducing him to take greatly
enlarged views of the nature and extent of
variations when engaged in systematically
grouping the numerous forms of organic
life into ~~clases~~ classes, Orders, Families etc and
species too. Under its guidance if I may
so express myself species will become
more natural? That is as in Man, dog,
sheep, oxen, &c we shall be enabled to
enlarge our Characters so as to include
varieties, arranging them in groups
as we now do species in the larger
genera and in like manner from
below upwards for though our classes and
Orders are now good they will perhaps
become better under the guidance of
the Derivative theory.

But when we ascend a step higher &

venture to grapple with the metaphysical
question Whence came all these won-
derfully varied and exceedingly perfect &
beautiful forms each so admirably adapt-
ed to perform the part assigned to it in
scale of nature? I feel that we at once
plunge into a labyrinth which has no
exit and from which human reason
can no more ^{extricate us} than it can enable us
to say what is life. It may be the
non-metaphysical character of my
mind which disqualifies me but I
honestly confess that the utmost stretch
of my imagination does not enable
me to comprehend the theory of derivation
when carried out to its consequences
as stated in the three extracts at the
head of your "second article" namely
that all animals & plants are respectively
derived from 4 or 5 progenitors: and that
how can I comprehend the probability
of all organic beings, which have ever
lived on this earth, being descended
from some one primordial form
into which life was first breathed &

and then left to work its way onwards and
onwards through ever changing forms
until it has clothed the earth's surface
and filled its waters with organic life
presenting almost every imaginable form
from the amoeba to the elephant & great tree
and range of duration from a few hours
perhaps minutes, to thousands of years: each
of these endless successions of forms capable
of reproducing itself and continuing the
form through myriads of generations.

This grand idea or view of life I acknow-
ledge my mind is incapable of grasping
neither can I see what philosophy gains
by the assumption that all organic beings
are descended from one or a few progenitors.
Surely there is no difficulty in supposing
that the first cause whatever that may
be, but which we designate the Deity
or God, could create 1000 or a million
of such "primordial forms" and breathe
life into all of them quite as easily as
into one, imparting to each such powers
of growth, reproduction, & duration that
each should assume a determinate form,
and become what we call a species not
perhaps so immutable as we short sighted
naturalists

jectors into which life had been breathed
by the Creator. Upon the whole much as
I esteem Mr Darwin, and admire your
lucid exposition of his theory I cannot after
the best consideration I have been able to give
to the subject accept his theory simply because
to my mind it is less philosophical than the
one it proposes to supersede.

I must now hasten to a conclusion. In asking
you to read this long letter on a subject which
in the multiplicity of your engagements
is likely ere this time to have become stale
or even well nigh, have escaped your memory
I fear you will consider me a regular
bores. Indeed the only excuse I can offer for
writing is the desire, which has been long
supermost in my mind, to spare you how
much I regret the interruption in our entire
course caused by my own idleness. Under
this feeling I have been looking out for an
excuse for writing and gladly avail
myself of the subject so ably discussed in
the brochure which Mr Darwin so kindly
forwarded, and hope that I have not utterly
exhausted your patience. I am glad to tell
you that our friend Ward, ^{who} left us a week ago,
much improved by his visit to Gray's Hall and
to remember him kindly when I write
to you. I told him I was going to do.
Our little winter is at last passing into spring
but hardly final spring. Love
I am truly yours
J. A. Gray

Robt Wright

If, I repeat, such be the true interpretation
of the dogma or principle these words are
intended to convey, then I am quite con-
-tent to let those who like it rejoice
in its adoption, preparing for myself
the good old axiom enunciated by
that most profound Philosopher Thomas
"God Created" asking no questions as to
either the how or the why, but always
admiring the profusion of fitness for their
object, of the things created. I find myself
the more readily adhering to these old
fashioned ideas by imagining that the
Natural Selection principle is at fault
in one point that is in the matter of
the vast numbers of the largest and
most powerful animals & plants having
become extinct species or forms, leaving
only a puny dwarfish progeny to supply
their place in the series, the "humans"
apparently, well fitted to hold their own
against all comers and to retain
their places through all the revolutions
of the Earth's surface to the end of Time

1st April. Wrote the preceding on Saturday and then laid aside my old *Stenophylla* fern which seemed quite exhausted by so successful an effort the like of which it has not been called upon to make for years!! On reading over this morning what I had written I felt better pleased with it than I expected for I find that I do not absolutely question the dogma of mutability of species - if we may still use that term, which for the present seems doubtful - though I cannot accept of it to the extent required by the theory, not because I think Darwin's views convey a too noble conception of the power of the Deity, which I work upon as nonsense, but because I cannot discover what either Philosophy or Physiology gains by accepting them. Naturalists may undoubtedly do & err greatly in restricting the doctrine of mutation within such narrow limits. But on the other hand I look upon it as next to impossible for even the well educated human mind to grasp the extraordinary idea of a Infusoria, in course of time, however long, becoming in its successive generations trans-
mutated

into a Whale or into an Elephant; or a Pyperis into an Oak or a *Palma*. and if these examples do not convey the proper idea of what is meant by the primordial germ or form what does? We know that an almost microscopic invisible spore contains the vital germ which placed in suitable circumstances will produce a Cryptogam it may be a moss mould, or a great fungus, or a magnificent tree fern, according to its parentage but not according to the circumstances in which it grows. In like manner a grain of pollen may if properly nurtured become a minute orchid or a gigantic Oak, but two grains from the same anther cannot become both; treat them how you may, it will only reproduce the parent form and that through a succession of millions of generations. And when mutations occur, which they certainly often do, who can say that they are such as to remove the plant from one class or order to another - A *Monocotyledon* does not become a *Dicotyledon* nor a *Ranunculus* a *Ros* but only a modified *Ranunculus*. A *Germatogon* becomes an animal but always resembles the parent near it as you will, that of a fish or a bird does not become a mammal. Hence I infer that if the mind cannot grasp the full meaning of the term of a hundred million years still less can it grasp the idea of all organic forms having descended from one or a few pro-



Wight, Robert. 1861. "Wight, Robert Mar. 30, 1861." *Asa Gray correspondence*

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