Abstract. Recent Darwin scholarship has provided grounds for recognising the Origin as a literary as well as a scientific achievement. While Darwin was an acute observer, a gifted experimentalist and indefatigable theorist, this essay argues that it was also crucial to his impact that the Origin transcended the putative divide between the scientific and the literary. Analysis of Darwin’s development as a writer between his journal-keeping on HMS Beagle and his construction of the Origin argues the latter draws on the pattern of the Romantic or Kantian sublime. The Origin repeatedly uses strategies which challenge the natural-theological appeal to the imagination in conceiving nature. Darwin’s sublime coaches the Origin’s readers into a position from which to envision nature that reduces and contains its otherwise overwhelming complexity. As such, it was Darwin’s literary achievement that enabled him to fashion a new ‘habit of looking at things in a given way’ that is the centrepiece of the scientific revolution bearing his name.

Keywords: Darwin, imagination, Kant, poetics, Romantic, science, sublime

Darwin is now recognised not only as the founder of the science of the evolution of the species, but as ‘the first Darwinian author,’’ the creator of a style much more than an explanatory hypothesis.1

The idea that On the Origin of Species owes any of its success to its literary qualities has been slow to gain ground. George Eliot’s2 early judgement that the book, whilst epoch-making scientifically, was “ill-written” prevailed for a century. Sporadic attempts by literary critics

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1 Stengers, 1997, p. 169.
like Baird and Hyman\textsuperscript{3} to argue that the \textit{Origin} was a form of imaginative literature, being a “dramatic poem” held together by an organizing metaphor of “the tangled bank,” appeared ridiculous to the scientifically-inclined.\textsuperscript{4} In the late 1960s Darwin’s book was still being seen as unliterary. “Scientifically, the \textit{Origin} is a classic … But verbally it is a rag-and-bone shop.”\textsuperscript{5} These perceptions hark back to Darwin’s\textsuperscript{6} own self-deprecating remarks about his literary skills.

A first step toward the reappraisal of the \textit{Origin} as a literary achievement was the realization that Darwin’s effort to portray himself as a particular kind of (ingenuous) author was both unusual in a scientist and crucial to the book’s success. Thus the arguments that writers had previously advanced against Darwin’s literary sophistication rebounded. Darwin unfailingly presented himself as a plain man without literary skill, “artless” but candid, “courteous, trustworthy and friendly,” a true gentleman-scientist, with great sympathy for his readers’ presumed doubts and confusions.\textsuperscript{7} He went out of his way to stress the difficulties he had tried to overcome in the \textit{Origin} and his apologetic awareness of the book’s imperfections, to such an extent that, in his son’s words, he ends up seeming so candid and humble as to be “almost pathetic.”\textsuperscript{8} It took authors like Campbell and Bulhof\textsuperscript{9} to point out that, given the \textit{Origin}’s status as an ‘abstract’ of a much longer book\textsuperscript{10} from which, with the exception of “a few facts in illustration,” all the details of supporting evidence “on which my conclusions have been grounded” had perforce been omitted, it was crucial that Darwin’s readers did find him to be trustworthy: “I cannot here give references and authorities for my several statements; and I must trust to the reader reposing some confidence in my accuracy.”\textsuperscript{11} Darwin was acutely aware

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\item \textsuperscript{3} Baird, 1946; Hyman, 1962, pp. 26, 33.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Among Charles Darwin’s chief precursors was his grand-father Darwin (1803; Bradley, 1994), whose book \textit{The Temple of Nature} was a long poem on evolutionary themes with long scholarly footnotes fleshing out the science behind his verses. Hence a Darwin writing poetically on evolutionary topics was not unprecedented.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Cannon, 1968, p. 172
\item \textsuperscript{6} Darwin, 1882; cf. Culler, 1968.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Browne, 2002, pp. 54–55.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Darwin, 1950, p. 115.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Campbell, 1970; Bulhof, 1992.
\item \textsuperscript{10} It was an abstract of Darwin’s “Big Book,” the writing of which the arrival of Wallace’s paper on evolution by natural selection interrupted. Much of the Big Book was eventually published in different places (Stauffer, 1975) – but Darwin never elaborated the \textit{Origin} into a longer text on the same topic.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Darwin, 1859, pp. 65–66.
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