

Review: Writing the Future: Progress and Evolution

David Rothenberg and Wandee J. Pryor (Eds)

Reviewed by [Enzo Ferrara](#)

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"We have stopped believing in progress:

what progress that is!"

Jorge Luis Borges

David Rothenberg and Wandee J. Pryor (Eds). *Writing the Future: Progress and Evolution*. Cambridge, MA: [The MIT Press](#), 2004. 274 pp., 17 illus., ISBN 0-262-18235-1, \$29.95 (hardcover).

After *Writing on Water* (2001), *Writing on Air* (2003), and three further volumes—*The New Earth Reader* (2000), *The World and the Wild* (2001), and *The Book of Music and Nature* (2001)—*Writing the Future: Progress and Evolution* is the latest title in the striking *Terra Nova: Nature and Culture* book series, which is now published twice a year by MIT and other university presses.

The goal of the *Terra Nova* series is to demonstrate the ways in which environmental issues are at the center of today's cultural debate. Artistic, scientific and social concerns are examined in order to cultivate new perspectives on the rift between contemporary western culture and nature. The result is a collection of fine literary and technical writings that in various ways address our sense of nature and the environment.

The anthology includes creative essays, poetry, and prose discussions of evolutionary processes: their sources, their strategies, their consequences, and their rationale—if any exists. The celebrated evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould frequently declared that progress and evolution do not associate. Accordingly, most of the authors in the book's four sections focus on the comparison and contraposition of the concepts of progress and evolution.

Part One, "Moths, Sex and Chaos," outlines the basic concepts of natural selection and challenges the theories of evolutionary biology. Michael Ruse's "Is Evolution a Social Construction?" suggests that most of the dialogue about evolution is an artifact of a culture looking for validation of its own being and belief systems. In his essay, "Why Do Birds and Bees Do It?", David C. Geary observes that evolution is driven by adaptation rather than

by concerted progress.

Most of the contributions in Part Two, "Steps from the Cave," focus on adaptation. Attention is paid to the changes that have occurred in humankind through the millennia—see Ellen Dissanayake and Andrew Schelling on the 30,000 year old rock art findings in southern France—as well as to the aging and maturing processes that happen to individual humans, often abruptly, after deep suffering—see Floyd Skloot's "The Wings of the Wind" and Valerie Hurley's "Riders on the Earth."

Part Three, "Places in Time," directly challenges the meaning of progress in this era of cloning, genetic manipulation, and biotechnological enhancement. The suggestion is that in order for civilization to function a sense of progress is necessary, but that this sense is hard to assess since the notions of "better" and "worse" inherent in the idea of progress are elusive and unscientific yardsticks.

The final part, "Getting to the Future," analyses the many manifestations of progressive notions. Kevin Warwick in "Intelligent Robots or Cyborgs," observing that with only five basic senses at their disposal humans have a restricted perception of the world, exalts the controversial enhancements offered by the amalgamation of modern technologies and the human body. "If you are happy with your lot as a human, then so be it; it's your choice. But", he warns, "those who elect to remain human will become a mere subspecies." (p. 210.) While agreeing that some hope resides with the future of technology, Joan Maloof in "De-evolution and Transhumanism" wonders if abdication of our dominating role is the answer. Once we have seen all the possibilities, she argues, a brake on consuming and a U-turn towards nature can be the simplest way to a better future.

Black and white photographs, poems and two letters from Charles Darwin to his sister Catherine function as interludes among the contributions.

As a whole, this collection challenges the positivist attitude to evolution that suggests that a process pertaining to millions of years of tumultuous life can be readily applied to the narrow time frame of human civilization. The consensus is that no species is supposed to stay on the top forever, and that it is difficult to discuss the possibility of a kinder, fairer, and wiser way of life when our resources are running out and while, although there are more years to live, the reasons to live for may be fewer. "Evolution shows the great power of aimless change," Pryor and Rothenberg affirm, "but human survival, if we make it, is something to celebrate only after we take aim. " (xv).

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