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‘A Veteran Scientist’s View.’

Alfred Russell Wallace’s “The World of Life” is one of those significant books that are the comfort of the reviewer in his dull vocation and the reward of the general reader for his diligent sifting of current literature in the hope of finding something valuable, substantial; something offering enrichment to his knowledge, stimulus to his speculation.

The book’s title gives some clue to its general character. It is a general survey of the world of life from its simple manifestations in the amoeba to its complex relations in man with his feet planted upon a world of infinite variety, his eyes gazing with almost divine speculation into a heaven of multitudinous stars.

But more than such a survey is the volume. It may indeed be said to have been written chiefly for the sake of the deductions its author has made from his observations. Prof. William Roscoe Thayer has said that in these deductions lies the impressive importance of the book. Their gist is: that life is a manifestations of creative power, directive mind; that life is a spiral whose volutes tend toward the spiritual.

Thus with the book’s various character—of observation, deduction, speculation—it may be described as a summary of scientific investigation since Darwin’s day and at the same time as a philosophical reaction against Haeckel and the exponents of materialistic universe.

The major portion of the volume is devoted to an investigation of life and its remarkable diversity in plants and animals, leading to such chapters as: The Numerical Distribution of Species in Relation to Evolution; Heredity, Variation and Increase; Some Extensions of the Darwinian Theory; The Mystery of the Cell.

Final chapters present an interpretation of life and its wonderful diversity. This interpretation attempts to stay those dragons of doubt and denial of spiritual values, which the Darwinian and succeeding theories of the mid-Nineteenth Century let loose upon the world.

It is somewhat significant that this author, to whom theories of evolution occurred simultaneously with Darwin’s to him, should now be the one to reinterpret those theories, to carry them over into a region where they help to reconstruct belief in spiritual values, spiritual tendencies in the universe. He will have none of Haeckel’s dicta: “Our own human nature sinks to the level of a placental mammal which has no more value for the universe at large than the ant, the fly of a summer’s day, the microscopic infusorium or the smallest bacillus.”

No, man in Wallace’s conception is the ancient glorious creature who once was deemed but a little lower than the angels. By the way the author brings back the angels, or their counterparts. Viewing the universe as the result of great creative power and directive mind, he opines that this dominant mind delegates much of the work of world-building to hierarchies of lesser creatures—those Miltonic myriads “who walk the earth both when we wake and when we sleep.”

This is typical of Sir Alfred Wallace's spiritual conception of a marvellously diversified world, allowing place for "imagination calm and fair," supposedly the haunts of a poet's fancy rather than a scientist's speculations.

But, as a matter of fact, as has happened in case of other thinkers in the vanguard of modern scientific thought—Sir William Crookes, Sir Oliver Lodge, William James, to mention but a few—such stable dwelling-places have spiritual conceptions made for themselves in the present veteran scientist's mind, he has even gone the length of foregathering with the spiritualists.

In the few passages that reveal this sympathy, the book is less interesting and cogent than elsewhere. Here it contains quotations from verses somewhat banal in form, unworthy of the distinguished argumentation which precedes and follows them.

Howsoever, for some these passages will have interest inasmuch as they affirm the author's belief in immortality. On this subject the great scientist is at one with the great Victorian poets. His peroration chimes with the conclusion of *In Memoriam*, with Browning's *Reverie* and the final passages of Browning's *Paracelsus*:—"But it is when we look upon man as being here for the very purpose of developing diversity, and individuality, to be further advanced in a future life, that we see more clearly the whole object of our earth-life as a preparation for it. The best conditions and opportunities will be afforded for continuous progress to a higher status, while all the diversities produced here will lead to an infinite variety, charm, and use, that could probably have been brought about in no other way."

Many a scientific pundit of the day will deny the older author any *locus standi* for such a view. He will seem to have made hope serve for logic—in the opinion of those grimly convinced that

"Dead men rise up never,
That no life lasts for ever,
That even the wildest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea."

Nevertheless those who lay down the volume, unconvinced by its final assurance, will have found it interesting, enriching. A tribute it is to the alertness and activity of its author's mind. Its lucid style commends it to general reader as well as to specialist.

The World of Life. By Alfred Russell Wallace. Published by Moffat, Yard & Co., New York.

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The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.