

## Completing the Paradigm: In Pursuit of Evidence

Why do we need an evolutionary theory of literature? Apart from its intrinsic interest and significance (of which more in a moment), does it make literature more accessible? Does it enhance our experience of reading (or hearing) it? Does it provide us with new knowledge about the human characteristics that are at the core of literature? Does it tell us anything about what may be distinctive to literary texts? Is the claim to scientific rigour that it brings to the field a credible or useful one? Is it likely to resolve the "crisis of morale in the humanities," as Carroll puts it, following several decades of poststructuralist hegemony?

In his target paper Professor Carroll insists that evolutionary literary theory has the potential to reorganize the whole field of literary scholarship. The more boldly and comprehensively this claim is made, the more these and other questions press themselves upon us for answers. In my comments I will consider how far Carroll's approach can answer these specific questions: they are the questions that interest me, but I assume that literary scholars who don't simply dismiss evolutionary thinking out of hand would also wish to raise them.

Intrinsically, the arguments for the significance of an evolutionary approach to literature seem undeniable. That human beings have evolved and, along with our other capacities, have developed facilities for producing and responding to literature, suggests that we will understand ourselves and literature better by considering what those facilities might be. If Carroll is right, such inquiry should help create new perspectives on our cognitive and emotional capacities, on formal aspects of texts, and on their social and historical functioning. So what has been achieved so far? In his paper Carroll lays out the agenda for the evolutionary paradigm, as he sees it, with theoretical clarity and in some detail, but he includes little by way of example showing what evolutionary literary criticism can accomplish. What might we expect? Here are some comments drawn from Carroll's paper.

Literature is important for “organizing motivational systems disconnected from the immediate promptings of instinct.” Carroll has in mind here the value of narrative in enabling us to imagine and rehearse situations offline, thus human beings with such a capacity are more adaptive and resilient. Similarly, he mentions Pinker’s notion that “literary plots provide game plan models.” The power of such models comes in part from the emotions they evoke. The arts, Carroll says, “fashion an imaginative universe in which the forces at work in the environment and inside the mind are brought into emotionally meaningful relations to one another.” How do such claims illuminate an evolutionary reading of a literary text? Take Brian Boyd’s account of *Mansfield Park*.

In Boyd’s evolutionary view “literature arises out of deep-rooted human needs and capacities,” not from the codes of structuralism or the ideologies of historicism (Boyd, “Jane” 13). Thus the central concern of Austen’s novel is with mating strategies. In particular it “focuses overwhelmingly on female choice,” where “females choose males as partners on the basis of their ability to support the offspring” (16). This helps account for Maria’s impulse to marry the first eligible suitor she sees, Mr. Rushworth; it suggests why, against powerful family pressures, Fanny Price firmly declines to marry the philandering Henry Crawford – she has detected him to be a cheat; and it explains the sense of rightness at the end with her marriage to Edmund. This reading reminds us that despite a highly patriarchal culture, the apparently weakest character, Fanny Price, turns out to be the most successful. As Boyd notes, much about the novel “can be interpreted in terms of biologically evolved characteristics of human life, rather than as no more than the product of a particular cultural moment” (23). In this perspective, the novel teaches us how to read its “game plan model” through the universalizing power of its cultural specificity. “No action or event is, for humans, ever just itself,” as Carroll puts it (28). Thus we have to puzzle out why the evasion of the locked gate in Rushworth’s garden by Henry and Maria seems such a transgression; or why, later, Fanny resolutely resists taking part in the theatricals. At such moments an evolutionary reading like Boyd’s helps us to see particularly clearly the nexus of emotion and environment—what is at stake for Fanny and the characters around her—and why Fanny’s judgements at such predicaments are so exigent (and always right!).

As Boyd acknowledges, however, his reading of *Mansfield Park* says little about Austen’s “artistic powers and problems” (23)—her tone, her language, her characterization, and other features of the text. His approach reads the text, albeit eloquently and tactfully, and with appropriate regard for its historical specificity, as

a case study of human mating strategies (female in particular). Put in this light, we can see that *Pride and Prejudice* affords a similar reading – a successful mating strategy in which the heroine pulls off a marriage with a higher status suitor. Indeed, this is the theme of a number of other novels, including a slew of modern romance fictions with little literary pretension. If the value of fiction for us, then, could be explained only in terms of its disconnected “motivational systems” and its “game plan models,” this would surely fall short of accounting for what is specifically literary in a text such as Austen’s. Is this as far as an evolutionary approach can go?

What is literary? How should we define “art” in order to bring it within the scope of an evolutionary approach? Here Carroll might benefit from an important point made by Ellen Dissanayake (“Making” 28-29): that to account for the evolution of art we should consider the art practised communally over the last 30,000 years or more, not just the fine or rare art that we tend to associate with the term now. What qualities made it adaptive? In the light of Carroll’s criteria, what “adaptive problem” did it resolve in the ancestral environment (26)?

Without going back to the tribal environment, which I am not qualified to examine (but see Dissanayake, *Homo*), here are two clues. First, consider Jonathan Rose’s findings on working class readers from the nineteenth century. Through surviving memoirs and letters, Rose found that a number of impoverished readers with only the most basic elementary education, and with no literary education or prior familiarity with literature, were able to pick up literary texts by authors ranging from Homer, through Dickens, to Hardy, and to read them immediately and with understanding and pleasure. These were not readers who had acquired the conventions of literary reading, supposed to be essential by theorists such as Culler or Rabinowitz. In addition, these were readers who, when in a position to choose, preferred to read what we now regard as canonical texts rather than texts written and published in penny editions specifically for working class readers. What was the source of their interest? Rose points to the engagement with character and what we have called the “game plan models,” whereby readers learned about a different world and, in some cases, how to become a part of it. A reading of their comments also shows that some readers were enthralled by the language of the literary texts they read, by its sounds and texture, by the novelty of unfamiliar words. This suggests a second clue.

In our empirical work (Miall and Kuiken) on readers’ responses to foregrounding (striking stylistic features in texts) we have found that all readers tend to be sensitive to it, at least to its presence in the modernist short stories we

asked them to read. This was shown in several ways: by longer reading times for sentences rich in foregrounding, by higher ratings on a strikingness scale for such sentences, and by higher ratings for feeling. We and others have replicated this effect whether working with readers with an advanced literary education, or with readers with little interest in or experience of literary reading.

What appears to be at issue here is what he have called defamiliarization, following the theoretical work of the Russian Formalist critics such as Shklovsky and the British Romantic writers such as Coleridge and Shelley. In the evolutionary framework, however, we can situate this in a wider context: elsewhere (Miall 190) I have classed the response to foregrounding as one type of dehabituation. Given the complexity of our responses to the natural and social environment and the rapidity with which our (mature) cognitive system identifies and evaluates the world around us, here is the value of a system that, within a prescribed space, calls our existing schemas into question: literary art offers us new perceptions, unfamiliar feelings, fresh evaluations. Through literary experience dehabituation provides a flexibility in feeling and thinking that is almost certainly adaptive. It is a solution to the problem of stereotyped, stock responses to the world which, in everyday terms, enable us to perform so efficiently. As Patrick Hogan has shown ("Literary Universals"), foregrounding, being found in the literature of every culture, can be considered a universal, a defining feature of literariness, and is thus a strong candidate for being analysed in evolutionary terms.

This leads to two further considerations. First, although in his target paper Carroll has placed a good deal of emphasis on contributing fields, arguing for the benefits of "scientific method," such as "a rigorous empirical analysis of cognitive mechanisms," the importation of theories and approaches from outside the field of literature itself brings the risk that the distinctively literary qualities of literature will be misrepresented or overlooked—a danger that "Humanistic sensitivity to the fine shades of tone and style" will likely not be effective enough to avert. As with dehabituation, with theoretical roots going back to Coleridge, literary theories that arise within and are inherent to the literary domain must be regarded just as seriously as those from the social sciences. If there is a distinctive quality to literature, here is where we might expect to find some of its elements. An evolutionary role for literature, we might hypothesize, only developed as it did for this reason, that human beings turned to literature for experiences unavailable elsewhere. Thus literary theories, drawn from the literary domain (regarding such matters as style, narrative structure, genre), must be regarded as central to the

evolutionary endeavour, if they can illuminate what is inherent to literary experience from the Pleistocene up to Jane Austen and beyond.

Second, remembering that most of the history of art occurred before the development of the high art with which we are now (in the West, at least) most familiar, we should work with ordinary readers as far as possible to help validate our proposals. Like the readers in Rose's study, these will be readers who turn to literature primarily for the experience it has to offer—for compelling narratives, for the pleasures of literary style—not, as we see practiced in literature departments, reading for the sake of interpreting a text—pursuing the Rule of Abstract Displacement, as Rabinowitz (139) has put it. Systematic empirical study of real readers, with effective experimental controls where appropriate, will do more than any other innovation we can envisage to bring together “the humanities and the evolutionary social sciences,” the consummation that Carroll wishes for. This approach, to return to my opening questions, should in the long run elicit or confirm the values that are central to the literary experience: thus, literature will become more accessible (with education making fewer inappropriate demands). Knowing better why we read may enhance our future literary experiences; and this, in turn, will teach us to know ourselves better.

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