

### Book Review

#### Literature Teaching Us About Life, and *vice versa*

*A Scream Goes Through The House*. By Arnold Weinstein. Random House: New York, 2003; ISBN 0-375-50624-1.

David P. Barash, Psychology Department, Box 351525, University of Washington, Seattle, Wa. 98053, USA. Email: [dpbarash@u.washington.edu](mailto:dpbarash@u.washington.edu).

Arnold Weinstein's *A Scream Goes Through The House* isn't an obvious choice to be reviewed in *Evolutionary Psychology*. After all, C. P. Snow's famous warning – now half a century old – that the humanities and the sciences constitute “two cultures” between which there is lamentably little communication, remains true today. On the other hand, perhaps this lamentable separation is all the more reason to encourage evolutionary psychologists to take account of Professor Weinstein's (and literature's) *Scream*.

Moreover, *Scream* is explicitly concerned with bridging that infamous gap between art and science... or, more accurately, between art and human beings as embodied, organic creatures. It is, in some ways, a feast of literary cardiology: “The heart of this book,” writes Weinstein,

... is precisely the human heart: the pump that keeps our body alive and the feelings that course through us and link us to others. Literature and art live in these two ways, as a bloodstream that connects us to the world, as a mirror for our emotions; and as a magic script that allows us both to sound our own depths and also to enter the echoing storehouse of feeling that goes by the name of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dickens, Munch, Proust, and all the great writers and artists whose work exists to nourish us. I see the great books as a feast for the heart.

He goes on:

For too long we have been encouraged to see culture as an affair of intellect, and reading as a solitary exercise. But the truth is different: literature and art are pathways of feeling, and our encounter with them is social,

inscribing us in a larger community; a community composed of buried selves and loved ones, as well as the fellowship of writers over time. Literature and art provide intercourse of a unique sort. Through art we discover that we are not alone... That picture of connectedness, of a universe that is umbilical and strange – a picture that no camera can take – takes the measure of our true lives.

And after all, isn't that what an evolutionary perspective on human beings also seeks to achieve: to take the measure of our true lives, to reveal the extent to which human beings are not alone, neither as atomized individuals nor as a specially created species disconnected from the rest of the organic world?

*Scream* is subtitled “what literature teaches us about life,” and it proceeds to examine literary representations of our lives as embodied, organic creatures, various “narratives of exposure” whereby our bodies are revealed, diagnosed, and understood (or misunderstood), various depictions of plague – both biological and metaphoric – and of death. It is a brave undertaking for any denizen of the scholarly humanities, especially in these days of postmodernist nonsense, when literary texts are seen as arbitrary orderings of components within their own semantic system, disconnected from anything so perverse as reality, and in which everything is supposed to be “socially constructed” and human nature, a chimera.

By contrast, both evolutionary psychologists and *Scream* proceed from the eminently reasonable assumption that biological reality exists independent of anyone's rhetorical flourishes, cultural constructs, or subjective experiences. Even solipsists look both ways before crossing a street and postmodernists, I suspect, submit their appendicitis to a surgeon, not a semiotician. Weinstein – a professor of comparative literature at Brown University who has long taught courses that conjoin literature and medicine – is a very savvy literary surgeon; he is to creative fiction what Richard Seltzer, Sherwin Nuland, and Oliver Sachs are to modern medicine. He is especially effective pointing out how literature is a “storehouse of emotions and insights about body and mind,” a treasure trove depicting and reconfiguring our most basic, shared feelings.

Throughout this astonishingly erudite yet accessible book, Weinstein shows that “[w]e are somatic creatures, living in bodies, having emotions, bathed by sensations, at time bubbling and simmering, at times dawdling and eddying, hot and cold, nervous and calm, fearful and yearning, hungry and satiated.” He also shows that he is dude who can write!

Although there is nothing overtly “sociobiological” about *Scream*, it doesn't take an overpowering imagination to perceive the evolutionary themes underpinning its arguments. For example, when discussing Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Weinstein notes how this play reveals

the astonishingly interactive, virtually incestuous life that all of us lead.

Theater, given its case of characters, is the social art form par excellence, and it is egalitarian in a way that neither poetry nor fiction can be: it grants life to the whole consort, and asks us to see just how porous, how interdependent, how infected, our private “agenda” really is.

### **Kin selection, anyone?**

Finally, a personal disclosure: I am currently in the final stages of writing *Madame Bovary's Ovaries*, a co-authored exploration of what might be termed “Darwinian literary criticism,” which (to reverse *Scream's* subtitle) seeks to reveal what life teaches us about literature. I very much hope that my daughter Nanelle and I will succeed in our enterprise as well as Arnold Weinstein has succeeded in his kindred endeavor. His ideas are fresh and cogent; his writing, superb. If you fear that you have labored too long in the vineyards of biology or psychology, becoming – ironically - a stranger to the scratch and scream of life while seeking to comprehend precisely that life, then you ought to consider doing yourself a favor and reading Weinstein’s book.

Sometimes I have wondered how professors of literature can devote their entire professional careers to explicating the works of others, even when those others are certifiable geniuses. Maybe it requires a suitably diminished ego, which in turn might generate willingness to engage in the kind of intellectual subordination implied in making someone else’s creativity one’s own life work; or maybe it is precisely the opposite, insofar as attempting to be Boswell to another’s Johnson may itself indicate a degree of ego-strength not possessed by those of us who insist that we’ll make our own way, create our own science, our own art, thank you very much. Or, maybe it is simple realism, since who among us can realistically claim to be demeaned by seeing oneself as a commentator upon the likes of James Joyce, William Faulkner, or Shakespeare? (Presumably, evolutionary biologists are not simply commentators on Darwin, but rather creators in our own right, albeit we all labor in his shadow.) But who would disagree with T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, when he announces “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”? Or refuse to be counted as being, at best, among the “attendant lords”?

In any event, *A Scream Goes Through the House* offers brilliant literary analysis and humanistic wisdom, filtered through a biologically sympathetic sensibility, and served up with gorgeous writing to boot. Arnold Weinstein – one of our most worthy attendant lords - thereby offers yet another answer to my own egotistical dilemma: in writing *about* the great literature created by others, he has created great literature himself.

**References**

- Barash, D. P. and Barash, N. R. (forthcoming). *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: Charles Darwin meets Charles Dickens ... and Gustave Flaubert ... and William Shakespeare ... and Jane Austen ... and Jonathan Franzen ....* New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Weinstein, A. (2003). *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life.* New York, NY: Random House.