

Book Review

The Taming of *The Literary Animal*

A review of Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Eds.) *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005. xxvi + 303 pp.

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United by an uncommon goal, seventeen well-intentioned contributors from diverse fields join forces in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* to broker an ambitious marriage of the humanities and the sciences. Theirs is a quest to taste the critical spoils to be had once the empiricism of evolutionary theory comes to bridle the wayward caprices of literary studies. With unabashed rhetorical flair and the confidence to match, Edward O. Wilson opens the collection with a “Foreword from the Scientific Side” in which he likens his cohort of naturalist critics to Columbian explorers on course to forever alter the face of the academy. He proclaims: “Confusion is what we have now in the realm of literary criticism. The naturalistic (‘Darwinian’) literary critics have an unbeatable strategy to replace it” (vii). The epistemological pendulum has, in effect, swung too far in the direction of social constructivism, and it is now up to a handful of visionaries with pluck enough to unearth the biological roots of culture. To this end, *The Literary Animal* offers a tripartite, veritable feast of essays framed by evolutionary science that moves from the theoretical to the aesthetic to the methodological. Buttressed by two forewords, an editors’ introduction, an afterword, and a comprehensive list of works cited, this text is not only an indispensable resource for those curious to learn more about the potential for application of Darwinian theories to literary studies, it is *the* resource (for better or worse) for gauging the provocative parameters of this emerging discourse.

The interdisciplinary platform that characterizes *The Literary Animal* emphasizes a relationship of reciprocity between the biological and the social. In his foreword, E. O. Wilson maintains that genes “animate and channel the growth of culture” while, in turn, culture “helps to determine which of the prescribing genes survive and multiply from one generation to the next” (ix). He sees science as neither “a philosophy nor an ideology” (x) but rather a methodology that can equip literary theorists with the tools to accomplish great things. Assuming Wilson to be on target

here, and this methodology is not inherently ideological, the obvious problem is that he, like most in the collection, openly privileges science and thus positions the humanities as grossly inferior to its more responsible sibling. As consequence, any conviction about this enterprise truly being a two-way street of equitable mutualism is significantly undermined.

With considerably more balance and reserve, Frederick Crews counters with a “Foreword from the Literary Side” that calls for “open dialogue about the new analytic horizons and neglected principles of inquiry” (xiii) brought to light by naturalist criticism. Although encouraged by the “widening of focus” he finds in *The Literary Animal*, Crews makes clear that “a science of literary criticism, strictly construed, may be neither desirable nor feasible at all” (xiv). In his view, the empirical predisposition characteristic of this direction of scholarship offers a “corrective” to “questionable assumptions and practices” in literary study, and above all, to “sociopolitical determinism” (xiv). However, Crews is not without his own Wilsonian moments, as when he concludes: “Our common aim, I would hope, is not to render literary criticism drier and more technical but to reclaim governance of the field...from the fast-talking superstars who have prostituted it to crank theory, political conformism, and cliquishness” (xv). The reader is left to wonder not only who these “superstars” might be, but even more so, what hidden agenda might be at play here, to say nothing of axes to grind and scores to settle.

On the heels of these dueling forewords comes the editors’ anecdotal introduction, highlighted by a rather unremarkable recounting of the misunderstood Darwinian graduate student, Jonathan Gottschall (“Jon’s Story”), who finally meets his open-minded, maverick mentor, David Sloan Wilson (“David’s Story”). They state the collection’s three guiding questions: What is literature about? What is literature for? What does it mean to apply a scientific perspective like evolutionary theory to a non-scientific subject like literary studies? An attempt to resolve these queries begins with part one, “Evolution and Literary Theory.” This section aims “to grapple with some of the problems and opportunities presented by the collapse of the constructivist foundations of contemporary literary theory” (4). Perhaps someone should tell the constructivists (apparently all literary critics who are not naturalists) about this “collapse.” In any event, the editors are quick to qualify: “a more restrained version of social constructivism is fully compatible with the emerging evolutionary models of human nature” (4). Such disclaimers, grounded in the reassurance that “the nature-nurture dichotomy is a false one” (4), represent a recurrent strategy used throughout *The Literary Animal* to ease imagined misgivings about takeover, but they do little to temper an all too often pedantic tone and the unmistakable, unapologetic imbalance of power, evident each time it boils down to which side holds the knowledge key.

Fortunately, part one does have its bright moments, like (most of) Ian McEwan’s opening chapter entitled “Literature, Science, and Human Nature.” After a concise overview of Darwin’s life and the origins of some of his theories, McEwan uses *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* to demonstrate cross-

culturally that emotions, as the byproduct of evolution, are universals. From such a biological base for human behavior, McEwan is able to convincingly analogize the universality of themes in literature, which he postulates as “encoding both our cultural and genetic inheritance” (11). Given the universality and constancy of emotions and their expression, evidenced by a passage from Homer, a buoyant McEwan announces: “Literature must be our anthropology” (18). Such enthusiastic optimism makes it seem a shame to note that McEwan’s bold proclamation overlooks the fact that *literature* is not a universal. Indeed, the troubling idea that “our bookshelves” (18) should replace anthropology, a field of study concerned with far more than those universal themes found in literature, ends the chapter on shaky ground.

In the chapter following, “Evolutionary Social Constructivism,” David Sloan Wilson concerns himself with what he sees as an unnecessary and counterproductive polarization in the academy between sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, on the one hand, and social constructivism, postmodernism, and deconstruction, on the other. He aspires to deliver “a more productive exploration of the middle ground” in order to demonstrate that social constructivism lends itself quite well to an “evolutionary formulation” (20). Framed by a concept of “behavioral flexibility” (23), his argument posits that learning and culture are not alternatives to evolution, but rather are evolutionary “in the sense that alternative behaviors are created and selected according to certain criteria” (26). In essence, narratives are important for adaptation to current environments, for stories have “genelike” (29) properties, in that our selves and our reality are ultimately constructed through narrative. The creative dimension of narrative is the very factor that allows for a “middle ground.” According to Wilson, evolutionary theory, premised on change, should complement, rather than combat social constructivism and, in turn, will enrich its own discourse by drawing on non-genetic processes represented by the “standard social science model” (36). With this gesture toward reconciliation Wilson concludes on a high note, even if the body of his contribution suffers from stylistic shortcomings (generated most acutely by his frustrating reliance on E1, E2, E3, S1, and S2 codes) and a poorly integrated barrage of research examples (like the list of “sample quotes” from Jerome Bruner’s latest book on the importance of narrative in the construction of meaning).

The particular disappointment of part one, however, is undoubtedly chapter three, “From Lacan to Darwin,” by Dylan Evans. More than out of place, it is questionable what contribution, if any, this curious invective against Lacan and any who might esteem him makes to evolutionary studies of narrative. The diatribe contains far too little discussion of the most interesting points – ethology, cognitive science, and Darwin – and far too much of Evans. With no small amount of effort, the reader might salvage some ideas, but if there is one chapter to miss in *The Literary Animal*, this is it. Thankfully, a more rewarding read follows with Daniel Nettle’s chapter, “What Happens in *Hamlet*? Exploring the Psychological Foundations of Drama.” He works from a twofold premise: first, as mimetic, drama imitates human social behavior, and second, a corollary must exist between the dramatic form and the

evolved mind, given the social survival of the former. Suggesting the possibility of “direct fitness enhancement from participation in fictional cognition” (62), Nettle insightfully propounds drama as “supernormal conversation” (66), with the biological application being a plastic continuum of tragedy as competition and comedy as mating game.

Next, Joseph Carroll weighs in with “Human Nature and Literary Meaning: A Theoretical Model Illustrated with a Critique of *Pride and Prejudice*.” He begins by addressing some common misconceptions about Darwinian literary criticism, answering objections, and laying out what he holds to be a minimum of analytic concepts (five) for “any reasonably competent literary analysis informed by a Darwinian understanding of human nature” (77). His thesis then emerges: “literature and the other arts do indeed have an adaptive function and...understanding this adaptive function is a prerequisite to understanding our specifically *human* nature” (78). In fact, for Carroll, “no work of literature” (79) is beyond Darwinian analysis, and only by attending to questions of “individual differences” and “domain-general intelligence” can the *variation* aspect of natural selection come to the forefront. “Life-history traits” engender a notion of “behavioral systems” that, according to Carroll, provide an alternative to the unnecessary dichotomy of humans as either the “fitness maximizers” of sociobiology or the “adaptation executors” of evolutionary psychology (82-3). Testing these ideas on *Pride and Prejudice*, Carroll makes central the dynamics of the “literary social interaction” between author, characters, and audience, and concludes that “Darwinian literary critics who ignore this dimension of analysis might be Darwinians, but they are not literary critics” (104). If one can forgive such instances of uncalled-for ego and a conspicuous lack of direct engagement with Darwin’s texts by this “literary Darwinian,” Carroll’s line of inquiry might offer some useful analytical strategies, like for example his discussion of “Meaning and Point of View in Literary Representations” (90-1).

Shedding fresh evolutionary light on overlooked aspects of very well-known works, the final two chapters of part one close the section productively. The first of these, Marcus Nordlund’s “The Problem of Romantic Love: Shakespeare and Evolutionary Psychology,” argues that romantic love is *not* a social construction and employs Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* to propose “a more specific connection between gender identity and genre” (117). After showing the deficiencies of approaches which proffer courtly love as simply a struggle between evolved needs and cultural constraints and of those which are purely psychoanalytic (110-11), Nordlund takes romantic love to be a literary problem inseparable from questions of sexual selection (118). From this perspective, he affirms that Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, where nubile females enjoy considerable power, reflect an “affirmation of female choice” (118). Ultimately, the fact that “female distrust of male idealization is at once biological and cultural” requires readers to arm themselves “with a theoretical perspective that does justice to such complexities” (123), and as Nordlund elegantly shows, the “interactionist orientation of modern Darwinian theory” (123) provides this very ammunition.

In like fashion, Robin Fox presents a strong case for taking a naturalist lens to literature in the final chapter of part one, “Male Bonding in the Epics and Romances.” In tension with the reproductive bond, the male-male bond so prominent in epics and romances, Fox contends, is “inimical” to the heterosexual bond (126-7). Whereas the earliest narratives turn on the male-female bond, one “would expect to find the male-male bond and its vicissitudes as a theme around which oral narratives, and then written epics, arranged themselves” (128). According to Fox, females of epics and romances can be classified as either “enabling” or “disabling” depending on how they affect the “creation” and “stability” of the male-male bond (128). The hypothesis, after some pithy readings of a selection of epics and romances, proposes that the male-male bond must represent more than just friendship if it is equal in strength and intensity to the male-female bond. The answer could “*involve sex,*” but is not “*about sex*” (142); more than likely, biological survival tendencies related to reciprocal altruism and kinship concerns are lurking. Rooted in an evolved “genuine need,” the male-male bond has not disappeared from warrior societies to modern times (and beyond); it may simply be “muted” (144).

At this point, the collection takes a dramatic turn with part two, “The Evolutionary Riddle of Art,” and its probing of the “ostensibly unfavorable cost-benefit ratios” (145) of human artistic inclinations, given an environment believed to be determined strictly by the drives of competition and reproduction. This section surveys current theories, in which evolutionists tend to fall back on explanations of “direct adaptation” (i.e. art as either promoting survival/reproduction or as an evolutionary side effect), and delivers contrasting responses in each of its two chapters. In the first of these, “Evolutionary Theories of Art,” Brian Boyd puzzles over “why an ‘appetite for the useful’ fails to predict so much of human activity” (147); if Darwin is right, evolution must also account for human art. After establishing a broad working definition of art and positioning culture as “*a part of nature*” (148-9), Boyd takes time to outline his own conjectures before providing an overview of four theories of art as biological adaptation (Pinker, Miller, Dissanayake, Tooby and Cosmides).

Boyd’s own position is, not surprisingly, the most persuasive (for Boyd): “art is an adaptation whose functions are shaping and sharing attention, and, arising from that, fostering social cohesion and creativity” (151). As for the ‘why’ questions sure to follow from such a declaration, Boyd would point to “the human capacity to think beyond the immediate” and to the human “behaviors that focus not on the immediate needs of the here and now but on directing attention and engaging emotion for its own sake, even toward distant realities and new possibilities” (152). In truth, his contribution to the collection, in its entirety, stands out for its stylistic sophistication and penetrating critiques, not to mention its comfortingly humanistic conclusion: “Science can explain why and how art has come to matter, but that will not give science the emotional impact of art, nor allow it to find a formula for art, nor make art matter less. If anything, it will only clarify why and how art matters so much” (172).

In the second chapter of the section, “Reverse-Engineering Narrative:

Evidence of Special Design,” Michelle Scalise Sugiyama asks: “Is narrative well-engineered to perform a fitness-promoting task?” (178). Her strategy for answering such a question is “reverse-engineering,” a method that allows her to dissect the anatomy of narrative. She first delves into the unique traits of narrative (language, organization, action, characters, conflict, setting) and then reassembles them in order to arrive at certain conclusions: narrative as an “information storage and transmission system,” narrative as mimetic simulation of human experience, narrative as cognitive modeling (190-2). The connection made between the last of these points and memory games appears to offer the most fertile terrain for further research.

More than likely, part three of the collection, “Darwinian Theory and Scientific Method,” will raise the eyebrows of both humanists and scientists alike. The section’s overarching issue centers on the application of quantitative methods to literary analysis. With literature understood as data, a threefold argument emerges to justify this direction of criticism: scientifically reliable information is possible from literature; literary hypotheses can be quantitatively tested; and, literary data supplies an untapped resource for scientific study (197). If this introduction makes the reader queasy, Jonathan Gottschall’s chapter, “Quantitative Literary Study: A Modest Manifesto and Testing the Hypotheses of Feminist Fairy Tale Studies,” is certain to increase the discomfiture. Sadly, far from a success, the elaborate presentation, multifarious justifications, and intricate steps used by Gottschall to build up and fortify his quantitative experiment on literature amount to a lot of smoke but no fire. Simply put, he employs statistical methodology (backed by a geographically diverse study sample, data collectors, coding forms, coders, and the necessary reliability standards) to ‘objectively’ measure the validity of the (supposed) claim made by feminist studies that gender is a patriarchal social construction *strictly confined* to the West.

Never mind the fact that his data quietly confirm the feminist position in all five areas under investigation (Scarcity of Female Characters, The Passivity and Heroism of Main Female Protagonists, Emphasis on Female Beauty, The Importance of Marriage, Stigmatization of Older Women) and the fact that he would not even have these categories were it not for the constructivist contributions of feminists, Gottschall has no reservations about concluding: “Despite its long-standing popularity, the *failure* [emphasis added] of the SCH [his acronym for “social construction hypothesis”] may come as no great shock to many literary scholars” (219). In the first place, one might wonder if the feminists in question here (conveniently buried in nonspecific footnotes) are actually opposed to the possibility/reality of patriarchal and socially conditioned cultural norms in non-European traditions. And, in the second place, one might imagine that an entrenched bias against social constructivism, especially as it relates to gender issues (made plain in “Jon’s Story”), could have something to do with the absurdity of the item tested and the laughable “failure of the SCH” conclusion claiming with a straight face to exemplify a “more vigorous and redoubtable” literary study. In other words, to empirically show that similar female representations, most of which are rigidly

patriarchal in nature, permeate all folktale traditions in all cultures of the world does not *scientifically prove* that “many aspects of gender previously considered products of arbitrary social conditioning are strongly influenced by biology” (219). No doubt, Gottschall is right to tout the “biosocial models of human behavior and psychology” (219); where he goes wrong is in unfairly attacking feminist scholars (in general) with unsubstantiated claims about *exclusively* European conclusions and in manipulating data to support what was for him obviously already a foregone conclusion.

Luckily, this trend does not continue, at least not with *as much* unchecked scholarly irresponsibility. The chapter following, “Proper Hero Dads and Dark Hero Cads: Alternate Mating Strategies Exemplified in British Romantic Literature” by Daniel J. Kruger, Maryanne Fisher, and Ian Jobling, also strives for empirical ‘interpretations’ of literature, but does so under the guise of a psychological research study that promises “an example of a scientifically grounded approach to literary study by empirically testing a specific literary interpretation that was, itself, derived from evolutionary theory on human sexuality” (226). Basically, with long-term versus short-term mating strategies as frame for this investigation, selected passages from Walter Scott and Ann Radcliffe exemplary of proper and Byronic heroes were shown to over two hundred female research participants, who then had to answer a series of questions. For example: With whom would you rather go on a three-week road trip to California, Waverly [proper hero “dad”] or George Staunton [libertine “cad” from *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*]? From this, the long-term and short-term relationship/sexual preferences of participants were deduced, and a conclusion was reached (from results that inevitably will strike the reader as far from conclusive): “In this study, we have shown that the mental adaptations of twenty-first-century college women enable them to properly interpret archaic character descriptions and make choices that would presumably promote their reproductive success” (239). Whether a slight preference to “hook up sexually with George Staunton” actually demonstrates that these participants “*properly* [emphasis added] interpret archaic character descriptions” leaves entertaining food for thought; how worthwhile such thought might be is another issue.

Finally, Catherine Salmon wraps up part three with “Crossing the Abyss: Erotica and the Intersection of Evolutionary Psychology and Literary Studies.” Examining evolutionary analysis of erotica, Salmon draws a connection between the sexual psychology of female and male audiences and the market production of romance novels and pornography, respectively. She then provides a perspicacious critique of the most prevalent, and often divergent, views of romance and pornography in order to introduce evolutionary theory as a viable approach to resolution. Some credible points are made about human reproductive and parental investment motivations, but an obscure test case on slash fiction leaves something to be desired, if only for questions about the number of readers actually interested in this marginal genre.

In his afterword, Denis Dutton embraces the impetus behind a project like *The Literary Animal* and suggests a possible carryover into the realm of aesthetics, what

he surmises might take shape as a “Darwinian aesthetics” (264). His opinion, like that of his fellow collaborators in this collection of essays, is that “the mantra that ‘it’s all culture’ has become tedious and empty” (263). He may very well be right, and, in fact, *The Literary Animal* goes to great lengths to show the biological underside of an epistemological monolith that has heretofore remained steadfast in its socio-constructivist leanings. Furthermore, an enterprise such as this, founded on tenets of consilience and greater rigor, is both admirable and very much needed. There is little doubt that this text contains enough quality ideas to merit an attentive read, and its intended public, both in the humanities and the sciences, should take advantage of this resource in order to become better informed about a legitimate discourse that does not seem likely to fade away anytime soon. Nonetheless, one repeatedly gets the sense that these naturalist critics would be better served without their ‘us against the world’ mentality. The empirical chest thumping and emblazoned rhetoric that permeate this work quickly wear thin and may ultimately alienate the very literary critics these scholars hope to convert. In the final analysis, greater humility and a more respectful voice are certain to be more persuasive and will ultimately allow the interpretive fruits of this evolutionary enterprise, which is strong enough to stand on its own, to do the talking.