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## CHAPTER 4



# Three Scenarios for Literary Darwinism

### Weighing Probabilities

Thirty years ago, the idea of creating a specifically evolutionary theory of literature would scarcely have seemed imaginable and would certainly not have seemed within the range of practical possibility. Nonetheless, over the past fifteen years, “literary Darwinists” have been making rapid progress in integrating literary study with the evolutionary human sciences. What is the likely future trajectory of this movement? We can probe this question by comparing three alternative scenarios: one in which literary Darwinism remains outside the mainstream of literary study; one in which literary Darwinism is incorporated as just another of many different “approaches” to literature; and a third in which the evolutionary human sciences transform and subsume all literary study.

For the first two scenarios, we can easily enough extrapolate from past and current beliefs and practices, but we also have to factor in the continuing development of the evolutionary human sciences outside of literary study. That would have an impact on the way life would be lived within the isolated enclave of literary study. It is one thing to be a small village in a world consisting only of small villages. It is another thing to be a small village surrounded by a world empire in confident possession of the practices and beliefs through which it has achieved unification and mastery. For the third scenario, we have to envision how literary study would

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1 develop within an evolutionary perspective that encompasses all  
2 the human sciences.

#### 4 Where Are We, and How Did We Get Here?

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6 Before considering the three scenarios, I shall quickly describe the  
7 trajectory that brought us to our current state. Through the first  
8 two-thirds of the twentieth century, most literary study operated  
9 under a shared set of beliefs and values extending back to the  
10 Victorian cultural theorists, particularly Matthew Arnold. Giving up  
11 on religion, the Victorians looked for existential “meaning” in two  
12 main areas: utopian social futures, and the arts, especially poetry.  
13 They thought the arts condensed the best wisdom of our collective  
14 humanity and also gained access to whatever amorphous spirituality  
15 was left over after deducting the historical validity of the Bible, the  
16 divinity of Christ, and the immortality of the soul. One of the things  
17 left over in amorphous spirituality was the idea of a divinely ordered  
18 progression of history leading to some ultimate condition of social  
19 harmony and intellectual fulfillment. The arts, and especially poetry,  
20 would be the chief medium for recognizing and participating imagi-  
21 natively in that blessed dispensation. However quaint such beliefs  
22 might now appear, until about 1980 they provided an overarching  
23 rationale for the two main kinds of study that occupied literary  
24 scholars: (1) hard-core scholarship—establishing texts, producing  
25 editions, collecting letters, writing biographies and literary histo-  
26 ries; and (2) detailed interpretive analysis of individual texts and  
27 descriptive histories of literary traditions. Some of this work was  
28 animated by explicit invocations of Marxist, Freudian, Christian, or  
29 Jungian ideas, but most of it was eclectic, oriented to the common  
30 language and the common understanding. This whole phase can  
31 be designated the traditional humanistic paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

32 By the late seventies, signs of overproduction had become  
33 unmistakable. Most of the major projects in hard-core scholarship  
34 had been adequately completed. Critics interpreting single works  
35 were forced into ever more tenuous and improbable speculations.  
36 To publish interpretive commentary, one has to say something new,  
37 and most of what could reasonably be said at the level of common  
38 observation had already been said. The solution, of course, was to  
39 turn to European speculative philosophy, first structuralism, and  
40 then, almost immediately, “poststructuralism.” The structuralists,  
41

supposedly, had demonstrated that structure is autonomous, a matrix or primary source, transcending content, and the poststructuralists demonstrated, supposedly, that structures are not only autonomous but anarchic, chaotic, impossible to pin down, and impossible to escape. “There is no outside the text,” and the text itself is a house of mirrors—fun-house mirrors—signifiers generating signifiers, with no signified anywhere in sight to anchor the endless recession of distorted images.

Deconstruction swept through departments of literature like flag-waving cadres of the French Revolution, galvanizing all the inhabitants, striking terror in some, provoking others into obstinate resistance, but in most exciting rapturous enthusiasm. The inferiority complex that had long dogged literature professors vis-à-vis the scientists, who actually got things done, suddenly gave way to an extraordinary hubris in which literature professors believed they had unique access to the ultimate nature of things. The world at large, exemplified, say, by *Time* magazine, was skeptical but intimidated, uncertain at first, but willing to acknowledge any new form of glamour that could command attention. For three or four years, the deconstructors played word games, discovered their inner verbal child, fashioned exquisitely ambiguous titles for theoretical articles, and, in their more sober moments, adopted postures of cosmic nihilism. To a watching world, all this ultimately seemed rather silly, but the main force at work undermining the deconstructive regime was internal. People go into literature not just to play games with words. Literature gives access to the most intimate and powerful aspects of experience. Deconstruction offered a general stance of radical subversion to all existing values, but it offered very little in the way of positive human content.

Foucault provided the content. He absorbed deconstructive irrationalism and gladly assented to the transcendental status with which the deconstructionists had invested “Discourse,” but he also had real bones to pick with the Western cultural tradition. He did not just adopt radical subversion the way a teenager adopts insolence, as a style. He went after the meat of the matter, systematically critiquing ideas of sanity, criminality, and sexuality, disdaining all social norms as arbitrary manifestations of “Power.” This was a creed by which literary scholars could live, for three decades anyway, right up to the present time. It gave them a program and a stance: to reread all texts as insidious machinations of political

1 power. Theorists and critics who have adopted this stance have  
2 a mission in life: to serve as the conscience of their race. Their  
3 constituencies are the victims of oppression in traditional power  
4 structures: especially women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and  
5 colonized peoples.

6 Three decades into the new postmodern hegemony, we are  
7 now also at least a decade into “the crisis in the humanities.” The  
8 subversive metaphysical and political fervor that fuelled the post-  
9 structuralist revolution has long since subsided into tired routine.  
10 The question that generated the revolution, “What next?” is being  
11 asked again, and with increasing desperation. In a recent essay on  
12 the parlous state of the humanities, Louis Menand professes himself  
13 willing to consider almost any possible option, only just not one  
14 particular option: “consilience,” that is, integrating literary study  
15 with the evolutionary human sciences. That option, he declares,  
16 would be “a bargain with the devil.”<sup>2</sup>

#### 17 18 Scenario One: And Never the Twain Shall Meet

19  
20 In the first scenario—a continuation of the status quo—a large  
21 majority of literary scholars continue to share Menand’s aversion  
22 to any connection with the evolutionary human sciences. The  
23 literary Darwinists stand wholly separate from the mainstream  
24 literary establishment, massively ignored, unable even to get panels  
25 accepted at the annual conferences of the Modern Language Asso-  
26 ciation, assiduously though silently expunged from citation lists and  
27 from surveys of critical theory, not merely neglected but actively  
28 and aggressively shunned. In this scheme of things, the literary  
29 Darwinists write essays critical of mainstream practices but have no  
30 productive interaction with the mainstream.

31 If literary scholars reject literary Darwinism, what other kinds of  
32 work can they produce? The same kinds they have been producing  
33 for three decades: arcane theoretical systems of a purely verbal,  
34 speculative character, diverse in superficial terminology, but alike  
35 in their commitment to “cultural constructivism.”<sup>3</sup> Along with the  
36 generation of more verbal systems, we would also have to have more  
37 readings of standard texts in terms of identity politics. This kind of  
38 thing might not seem susceptible to endless repetition. Hence the  
39 need for the constant proliferation of superficial variations in the  
40 verbal systems used for interpretation.

The poststructuralist revolution was based on no actual discoveries and no ideas more substantial than willful paradox and sophisticated quibble.<sup>4</sup> That kind of intellectual foundation could vanish overnight, leaving nothing even for archeologists to sift through. Would it be possible then for literary study to cycle back through a traditional humanist phase? Possible, but not very likely. Traditional humanists are committed to literature itself as the deepest source of insight and wisdom. They are thus committed to the common idiom, and that idiom has already pretty much exhausted itself as a source of commentary on the standard texts. In contrast, the fundamental poststructuralist axiom is that meaning is “constructed.” If that is the case, the supposedly determinate structure of meanings in a finite body of canonical texts would exercise no constraint on the proliferation of interpretive terms. Hence the greater likelihood that poststructuralism will have achieved, in a steady-state world, a permanent hegemony in literary study. It offers the hope of something always new to do, even if that novelty consists only in variations in analytic terminology.

If literary study continues indefinitely in the poststructuralist vein, it will do so under two forms of degenerative pressure: the inner inanition that is already so frequent a source of complaint among its own practitioners, and the ever growing prestige and power of the scientific understanding of human nature. Under that external pressure, “Theory” will have to become ever more elusive, avoiding all direct formulation of propositions that obviously conflict with established results of scientific research. The strategy for eluding science need consist only in refinements of a procedure already widely practiced: formulating all propositions simultaneously in two separate versions: the radical and the truistic. The radical version gives the appearance of a substantive proposition startling in its novelty, and the truistic version gives the appearance of logical invulnerability. The blending of the two versions gives the delusory appearance of propositions that are both new and true—the holy grail of all research. For instance, “There is no outside the text.” Radical version: “Nothing exists outside of verbal constructs; only verbal constructs exist.” Truistic version: “Everything we can talk about we can talk about only by using words; all our verbally mediated experience is verbally mediated.” The radical version gives a fallacious appearance of profound novelty, suggesting a fundamental alteration in folk epistemology—that is,

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1 common sense. The truistic version, mingling indistinguishably with  
 2 the radical version, invests the radical version with the self-evidence  
 3 of tautology. When critics make damaging arguments against  
 4 the radical version, the deconstructor can smoothly retreat into  
 5 truism. “All I really meant to say was . . .” or, preemptively, “This  
 6 is not to say . . .” Anyone willing to participate vicariously in the  
 7 conceptual blur produced by the mingling of the two versions can  
 8 enjoy the characteristic deconstructive *frisson*, the little shiver of  
 9 cognitive pleasure at the manifestation of the Uncanny. To give  
 10 substance to this *frisson*, one need only transpose the logic of  
 11 equivocation into a slightly more concrete proposition: “All identity  
 12 is socially constructed.” Radical version: “The only constituents of  
 13 identity are arbitrary social conventions; even something as basic  
 14 as biological sex is purely and exclusively a construct of arbitrary  
 15 social conventions.” Truistic version: “Humans are social animals;  
 16 all human experience is influenced in some way by participation in  
 17 social life.” In the blur between these two versions, most criticism  
 18 has persisted now for decades, and could persist into the indefinite  
 19 future.

20 We can fancy, in this scenario, that poststructuralism never dies,  
 21 but we cannot fancy that it does not age. Time passes. Gollum  
 22 dwindles and shrivels, becoming less human, but retaining physical  
 23 vigor. Tithonus shrivels into a cricket but chirps perpetually. The  
 24 Struldbrugs, in the third book of *Gulliver’s Travels*, grow ever older,  
 25 becoming more ill-tempered, narrow-minded, and senile, but happy,  
 26 they and those who live with them, in the assurance that they will  
 27 never die.

28 While Gollum dwindles, Tithonus chirps, and the Struldbrugs  
 29 drool, what of the literary Darwinists? The first monograph in  
 30 literary Darwinism, *Evolution and Literary Theory*, appeared in 1995.  
 31 The number of books and articles published since 2007 and now  
 32 in press—a four-year span—far exceeds the number published alto-  
 33 gether in the twelve years from 1995 through 2006. In a steady-state  
 34 scenario, this exponential growth could not continue. Otherwise,  
 35 within just a few years, literary Darwinism would have come to  
 36 dominate literary study, violating the premise of the scenario. So, we  
 37 have to assume that the rate of growth in literary Darwinism not only  
 38 levels off but actually declines—and all this while poststructuralist  
 39 literary study is losing heart, on the one side, and the evolutionary  
 40 human sciences are making giant strides on the other. Unlikely, but  
 41



so goes the scenario. Within this scenario, we need say only that the literary Darwinists would continue to do the kind of work they have been doing all along. (For detailed information on what they have been doing all along, see the first chapter in this volume.)

The most important institutional blockage limiting further growth in literary Darwinism is that only one or two graduate programs, so far, allow students to pursue this line of work. In the steady-state scenario, then, we have to assume that older scholars continue to prohibit their students from taking up this line of investigation. Consequently, the work published in literary Darwinism would continue to be produced mostly by scholars who had already gained tenure on the strength of more conventional kinds of research.

#### Scenario Two: Joining the Party

In this second scenario, we can slot in the description of mainstream literary study from the previous scenario, assuming it would remain much as it now is or will be. The only thing that would change in this second scenario is that literary Darwinism would not be shunned. Nor would it become a dominant, commanding perspective, altering the whole paradigm of literary study. It would simply be recognized as yet one more “approach” to literary study. Two institutional markers would signal the realization of this scenario: evolutionists would have panels accepted at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association and its regional affiliates; and interpretive essays in literary Darwinism would regularly be included in casebooks of canonical literary texts. Most such casebooks now include essays exemplifying Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, and New Historicism (that is, Foucauldian cultural critique).

Among some of my colleagues with an evolutionist bent, this second scenario seems the most likely of the three. It takes account of the rapidly increasing visibility and prestige of literary Darwinism outside the academic literary establishment—for instance, the notices that have appeared in journals and newspapers around the world, from *Science* and *Nature* through *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *TLS*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and periodicals in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Russia, India, Brazil, and Japan. Since the Darwinists have vindicated their claim that

1 evolutionary ideas can be used for literary interpretation, and since  
2 they form a rapidly growing minority of literary scholars, is there  
3 any reason that this second scenario might not almost inevitably  
4 take place sometime within the next few years? I think there is.  
5 Marxism, Freudianism, and deconstruction are all totalizing in  
6 their own ways, but they can also all be converted into forms that  
7 make them parts of the standard postmodern blend. Althusserian  
8 Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis are essentially compatible  
9 with Foucauldian discourse theory. And indeed, “poststructuralism”  
10 as a school can be most concisely defined as the subordination of  
11 Marxist social theory and Freudian psychoanalytic theory to decon-  
12 structutive semiotics. That is the message in Foucault’s definition of  
13 “discursive practices.”<sup>5</sup>

14 Can Darwinism be subordinated in this way to the transcendent  
15 power of the sign? Efforts along this line have not been wanting. In  
16 *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer takes Darwinian themes as precursors  
17 for Derridean indeterminacy. George Levine takes a similar line in  
18 *Darwin and the Novelists*. Ellen Spolsky adopts the idea of “cogni-  
19 tive domains” from evolutionary psychology and uses this idea  
20 as evidence for the Derridean claim that cognition is necessarily  
21 incoherent.<sup>6</sup> Still, no specifically Darwinist form of poststructuralist  
22 interpretation has emerged from these efforts. Poststructuralism  
23 yields causal primacy to language. To think in evolutionary terms,  
24 in contrast, is almost automatically to adopt a perspective of deep  
25 time, a perspective in which “life,” self-replicating DNA, precedes  
26 thought, to say nothing of language. One can speak of DNA itself  
27 as a form of “language,” but this is just a metaphor, and it does not  
28 take one very far into the formation of personal and social identity.  
29 “Constructivist” and biological notions of personal and social iden-  
30 tity seem inherently incompatible. Biology is too deep, broad, and  
31 basic to be easily or convincingly depicted as just another semiotic  
32 gambit.

33 The powerful disciplinary motives behind literary academics’  
34 resistance to biology form a natural bond with ideological motives.  
35 If human nature were “socially constructed,” it could easily be  
36 changed to fit more neatly into whatever moral and political  
37 forms one might favor.<sup>7</sup> Causal force would reside primarily not  
38 in underlying biological realities but rather in the formulation of  
39 social ideals. One would need merely to think an ideal, using it to  
40 guide one’s commentary on literature and life, in order to bring  
41

about desirable social change. This idealist approach is a particular manifestation of a pervasive and perhaps universal human cognitive disposition: the disposition for wishful thinking. Wishful thinking offers the solace of comforting illusion and could possibly even have adaptive, therapeutic value, easing stress and making it easier to endure insoluble problems. Nonetheless, pleasurable fantasy necessarily operates in tension with adaptive dispositions for finding out how things actually work. Literary academics at the present time are perhaps particularly susceptible to wishing away real social problems, rather than understanding them, because they have painted themselves into a disciplinary corner. Having abjured the prospect of gaining real knowledge, they have inevitably placed a heavy emphasis on moral and political judgment as the chief justification for what they do. If they cannot offer objective knowledge about their subject, the rationale for their professional existence must be that they occupy a superior ideological perspective. This professional *raison d'être* is a politicized, poststructuralist version of the humanist idea that a literary education makes one a better person. Poststructuralist ideologues envision a world in which conflicting interests and differential distributions of power no longer exist. Accordingly, they look with disapproval on all actual forms of social and political organization. They thus guarantee for themselves a perpetual stance of ideological superiority. Darwinism is by no means incompatible with an informed and humane moral creed,<sup>8</sup> but it is most definitely incompatible with the utopian ideal of a world order in which conflicting interests and differential distributions of power do not exist.

Despite the inherent incompatibility between Darwinism and Foucauldian cultural critique, for the purposes of the scenario, let us imagine that the Darwinists are brought into the casebooks. Would they consider themselves just one more approach among many? Some no doubt would. "Pluralism" is a chronic symptom of theoretical confusion in the humanities. The idea is that the world is divided into two main parts: a physical part that can be understood by science—reduced to components, quantified, and unified—and an imaginative, cultural, spiritual, or personal part—qualitative, consisting of unique irreducible moments of experience and unique irreducible effects, aesthetic and imaginative. By its very nature, this second world could never be reduced to a unified set of underlying regularities. It could only be described and evoked. Its essence is

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1 not reductive law but phenomenal particularity. The best way to  
2 deal with it is to bring as many perspectives as possible to bear on a  
3 subject and thus to illuminate as many diverse aspects of the subject  
4 as possible. The diversity of aspects would never add up to a single,  
5 unified phenomenon, and explanations of those aspects would  
6 never add up to a single, unified explanation. Though denied the  
7 ultimate satisfaction of unified causal explanation, adherents of this  
8 worldview can look forward to an endless succession of incomplete  
9 and incompatible interpretive responses to the same finite body  
10 of novels, poems, and plays. This, more or less, is the pluralist  
11 metaphysic. However diverse their overt professions of theoretical  
12 allegiance, this metaphysic defines the deepest convictions in most  
13 practitioners in the humanities today.

14 What, then, would a Darwinist contribution to a casebook look  
15 like? To qualify as Darwinist, a reading would have to bring all its  
16 particular observations into line with basic evolutionary principles:  
17 survival, reproduction, kinship (inclusive fitness), basic social  
18 dynamics, and the reproductive cycle that gives shape to human  
19 life and organizes the most intimate relations of family. While  
20 retaining a sense of the constraining force of underlying biological  
21 realities, literary Darwinism would also have to emulate the chief  
22 merit of Foucauldian cultural critique—its understanding that the  
23 forms of cultural representation are highly variable, that these  
24 variations subserve social and political interests, and that every  
25 variation has its own specific imaginative quality. As it is currently  
26 practiced, cultural critique usually arrives at its conclusions in a  
27 theoretically illegitimate way, by assuming the causal primacy of  
28 representation. This is what it means to say that reality and social  
29 identity are “constructed.” Despite the obvious fallacies in this idea,  
30 Foucauldian critique often has rich descriptive power. The Foucaul-  
31 dianians have achieved dominance in literary study partly because they  
32 recognize that the chief purpose of literary study is to examine the  
33 forms of cultural imagination. To compete for space in casebooks,  
34 then, the Darwinists would almost necessarily have to eschew their  
35 own tendencies toward literalist representationalism—the idea  
36 that literary texts merely depict a preexisting reality in a true and  
37 faithful way.

38 Vulgarly accompanies theoretical movements the way camp  
39 followers—hawkers, prostitutes, and idlers—accompany an army in  
40 the field. Just as there is a “vulgar Marxism,” there is also a “vulgar  
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Darwinism.” Yet further, there is a vulgar form of literary Darwinism. In its most naïve form, literary Darwinism consists in merely pointing to the existence of Darwinian themes in various works of literature. Madame Bovary wants a mate with more status than her husband. Anna Karenina is bored with her respectable husband and gets charmed into an illicit relation with a Byronic type better suited for short-term mating. No wonder she ends up throwing herself beneath a train. Tom Jones just can’t resist a roll in the hay with Molly Seagram, and that gets him into hot water with Sophia Western, but he is only doing what comes naturally to males, so she forgives him in the end. Had Sophia herself been found dallying with Molly’s brother, the outcome could not have been so favorable. The sexual double-standard is just part of human nature.

In its short history, vulgar literary Darwinism has already become established as a convenient target for critics eager to dismiss the possibility of evolutionary criticism in its more sophisticated forms.<sup>9</sup> Practitioners of the more sophisticated forms recognize that literature does not simply represent typical or average human behavior. Human nature is a set of basic building blocks that combine in different ways in different cultures to produce different kinds of social organization, different belief systems, and different qualities of experience.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, every individual human being (and every artist) constitutes another level of “emergent” complexity, a level at which universal or elemental features of human nature interact with cultural norms and with the conditions of life that vary in some degree for every individual. Individual artists negotiate with cultural traditions, drawing off of them but also working in tension with them. The tension derives from differences in individual identity, the pull of universal forms of human nature, and the capacity for creative innovation in the artist. Individual works of art give voice to universal human experience, to the shared experience of a given cultural community, and to the particular needs of an individual human personality. Literary meaning consists not just in what is represented—characters, setting, and plot—but in how that represented subject is organized and envisioned by the individual human artist. Moreover, literary meaning is a social transaction. Literary meaning is only latent until it is actualized in the minds of readers, who bring their own perspectives to bear on the author’s vision of life. A thorough interpretive effort would subsume represented subjects and formal organization into an overarching concept of

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1 literary meaning, and it would expand the concept of meaning to  
2 include its transmission and interpretation. Still further, instead  
3 of looking only at intentional meanings and the responses of  
4 readers, a thorough evolutionary critique would look at the kinds  
5 of psychological and cultural work specific literary texts actually  
6 accomplish—the functions they fulfill—and it would locate those  
7 functions in relation to broader ideas of adaptive function, thus  
8 bringing the interpretation of individual works to bear as evidence  
9 on the larger, still controverted question of adaptive function.

10 The more any Darwinian critique succeeded in achieving  
11 this kind of total reading, the less compatible it would be with  
12 the pluralism implicit in casebooks. If Darwinism becomes just  
13 another approach included in casebooks, it will probably do so  
14 by carving out its own distinctive niche in a way parallel to that  
15 of the deconstructionists, Freudians, Marxists, and feminists. Like  
16 their fellow practitioners in other schools, Darwinists would need to  
17 make their interpretive essays distinctive by making them crude and  
18 sensationalistic. Casebook essays typically earn their keep by riding  
19 hobby horses into the ground. They sacrifice justice and sensitivity  
20 in favor of programmatically rehearsing terms that distort the actual  
21 structure of meaning in a literary text. If the Darwinists wish badly  
22 enough to be included in casebooks, they should be able to meet  
23 these requirements with no more difficulty than that encountered  
24 by practitioners of the other critical schools.

### 25 26 Scenario Three: Back to the Future

27  
28 If literary Darwinism were to be dominated by its vulgar form, the  
29 evolutionists would have some chance of getting into the casebooks  
30 but no chance of ultimately transforming literary studies. Transfor-  
31 mation involves renovation from the ground up, eliminating the  
32 endemic confusion of “pluralism” and carrying through on the  
33 implications of a Darwinian vision. It is not the case that there is  
34 nothing outside the text. It is not even the case that there is nothing  
35 outside of life. Before life evolved, there was a physical universe in  
36 which it could evolve. It *is* the case, though, that there is nothing  
37 in life outside of evolution. That means both less and more than  
38 it might seem to mean. It does not mean that the forms of literary  
39 development—genres and traditions—exactly parallel the macro-  
40 structures of evolutionary development. It does not mean that all  
41 human experience is driven in a simple and direct way by the biblical

injunction *go forth and multiply*. It does not mean that all literary characters exemplify average or species-typical forms of behavior. It certainly does not mean that all authors, even ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and neoclassical authors, are crypto-Darwinists. What it does mean is that all humans past and present have evolved under the massively constraining force of adaptation by means of natural selection. It thus means that the species as a whole has a characteristic structure of “life history.” That life history entails a species-typical set of motive dispositions and emotional responses, and along with them a species-typical range of personality characteristics. Individuals can and often do vary from the species typical, but the species typical provides a common frame of reference. Individual persons vary from that base line in ways that have systemic effects on the motivational and emotional characteristics of the whole system. Individuals can mate with members of their own families, prefer sexual partners of their own sex, murder their parents or children, live celibate lives in religious orders, consign themselves to perpetual hermitage in deserts, starve themselves to death, throw themselves on hand grenades, blow themselves up in crowded market squares, devote their lives to charitable purposes, sacrifice worldly ambition for the sake of art, or write books declaring that reality is purely a social construct. All of these forms of behavior can be traced to the only possible source of all behavior: the interaction between genetically transmitted dispositions and specific environmental conditions. Consequently, none of these behaviors is “unnatural,” and indeed, there is no such thing as an unnatural form of behavior. Every form of behavior consists in some discernible combination of the elements of human nature interacting with specific environmental conditions. Every form of behavior has its own distinct set of affects; everything comes with a cost; every form of satisfaction sacrifices some other possible form of satisfaction; every fulfilled impulse works in tension with some other impulse left unfulfilled; and every act shapes the total organization of feeling and perception in the whole organism and in the larger social groups in which virtually all individual humans are embedded. The motives and passions that have derived from an adaptive evolutionary process constitute what we call “human nature.” Intuitive perceptions of these motives and passions are products of “folk psychology”—the common, shared basis for the understanding of intentional meaning in other human beings. Folk psychology is the *lingua franca* of social life and of literature.

1           The Darwinian literary study that, in this scenario, will ultimately  
2 absorb and supplant every other form of literary study will assimilate  
3 all the existing concepts in literary study—traditional concepts of  
4 style, genre, tone, point of view, and formal organization, substan-  
5 tive concepts of depth psychology, social conflict, gender roles,  
6 family organization, and interaction with the natural world. It will  
7 not just take those concepts ready-made and tack them together  
8 like a shack made of flattened cans and scraps of cardboard on the  
9 edge of a third-world city. It will use them as heuristic guides to  
10 the emergent structures that are most relevant to literary study as  
11 a subject matter with its own peculiar features and concerns, but  
12 it will rebuild each of those concepts *de novo*—reshaping, breaking  
13 down, consolidating, and adding—by direct and explicit reference  
14 to the rapidly expanding research in all the contiguous disciplines  
15 of the human sciences.

16           Most of the literary Darwinists now at work have been trained  
17 in the old schools and have been teaching themselves new concepts  
18 and methods, striving and sometimes struggling to gain an assured  
19 perspective on disciplines in which they have no specialist exper-  
20 tise—evolutionary biology, genetics, psychology, anthropology,  
21 linguistics, personality theory, and cognitive and affective neurosci-  
22 ence. At the same time, they have been integrating these concepts  
23 with traditional concepts in literary study, building theoretical  
24 principles that could explain and direct their efforts, and seeking to  
25 vindicate these theoretical constructs through Darwinian readings  
26 of specific texts. All this is necessary, but it is not enough.

27           There are no real ontological or epistemological barriers sepa-  
28 rating the humanities and the evolutionary human sciences. We  
29 do not occupy parallel universes, stepping comfortably out of one  
30 when we drive a car or visit the dentist and into another when we  
31 read a novel, look at a painting, or listen to a piece of music. It is all  
32 the same world, intelligible by the same instruments.<sup>11</sup> The barriers  
33 separating these two worlds are the barriers merely of convention  
34 based on ignorance. “Pluralism” elevates those conventions to  
35 the dignity of a theoretical position, and that position provides  
36 a rationalization for maintaining the habitual limitations in the  
37 scope of our subjects and the methods by which we investigate those  
38 subjects. In this third scenario, the pace of production in Darwinist  
39 publication will continue or increase; the institutional resistance  
40 of the postmodern establishment will crumble from within, almost  
41 silently, softly metamorphosing into dust, like the Soviet empire, as



a result of intellectual dry rot. A few hammer blows no doubt will be needed to knock down actual obstructions, like the Berlin Wall, but these blows are more symbolic than substantive. The real barriers are in the minds of men and women. As these changes occur, the Darwinists will not be elevated into comfortable hegemony, simply taking possession of the seats of power vacated by the erstwhile commissars of the postmodern politburo. They will be in something like the same position as the former states of the Eastern Bloc, running hard just to catch up with their more prosperous neighbors to the West, working day to day to maintain life while simultaneously rebuilding their whole institutional infrastructure.

In this third scenario, high school students will all take introductory courses in statistics, which are, after all, less demanding mathematically than the more advanced forms of math in the standard high school curriculum. Undergraduates, as part of their general education, will take more advanced courses in statistics and will also take courses in empirical methodology. This will not be so much an added burden as it might seem, since the whole undergraduate curriculum will be much more unified than it now is. Courses in the “social sciences” will themselves all be integrated from an evolutionary perspective—the perspective that prevails now, for instance, in journals such as *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. The evolutionary human sciences will be closely integrated with required courses in evolutionary biology, molecular biology, and the sciences of the brain. Students in the humanities will develop basic proficiency in these disciplines in the same way virtually all European students, in all disciplines, now develop a good working knowledge of the English language.

When undergraduate English majors write papers on Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf, Chaucer or Charlotte Brontë, they will in some ways do what they have always done—talk about characterization, personal and social identity in the characters and in the author, style, point of view, tone, the organization of narrative, and cultural contexts and literary traditions. But in other ways, all this will be different. In writing of personal and social identity, they will not have recourse to obsolete and misleading ideas from Freud, Marx, and their degenerate progeny. They will have recourse instead to empirically grounded findings in the evolutionary human sciences. In speaking of tone and point of view, they will make use of cognitive and affective neuroscience. They will consider local affects in relation to the actual brain structures and neurochemical circuits

1 that regulate emotions, to “mirror neurons,” Theory of Mind, and  
2 “perspective taking.” In assessing style and the formal organization  
3 of narrative or verse, they will take account of underlying cogni-  
4 tive structures that derive from folk physics, folk biology, and folk  
5 psychology. They will still bring all their intuitive sensitivity to bear,  
6 registering the affective qualities that distinguish one work from  
7 another, communing in spirit with the author, or holding off skepti-  
8 cally from authors with whom intimacy for them is repugnant. They  
9 will not regard their own subjective responses as wholly arbitrary nor  
10 as somehow incommensurate with the brain structures that regulate  
11 behavior, thought, and feeling in ordinary life. When they locate  
12 literary works in relation to cultural context, they will have recourse  
13 to new forms of history, both forms that use brain science to create  
14 an ecological and psychopharmacological profile of a given era,<sup>12</sup>  
15 and also forms that delineate large-scale laws of social organization  
16 deriving from elementary processes of inter-group conflict and  
17 intra-group organization.<sup>13</sup> They will draw on knowledge both of  
18 the actual social and political situation and of the deep evolutionary  
19 background for that situation. We already see works of literary schol-  
20 arship that answer to this description.<sup>14</sup>

21 When they come to graduate study, aspiring literary scholars will  
22 have open before them a wide spectrum of methodological choices,  
23 ranging from the purely discursive, essayistic forms of commentary  
24 that now dominate the humanities to the rigorously quantitative,  
25 empirical methods that now prevail in the sciences.<sup>15</sup> Some no doubt  
26 will tend more in one direction than in another, but none will think  
27 that quantitative and discursive forms of study occupy separate and  
28 incommensurate universes. They will not cast about desperately for  
29 novelty, taking recourse in superficial verbal variations ensconced  
30 in sophisticated theoretical ambiguities. They will, rather, wake up like  
31 kids at Christmas, delighted with the endless opportunities for real,  
32 legitimate discovery that are open to them.

### 33 34 Conclusion: Belief in Things Unseen

35  
36 In one way, the third scenario is the hardest about which to make  
37 concrete predictions. To predict a continuation of the status  
38 quo, one need only extrapolate from what one can actually see  
39 and factor in the consequences of degenerative pressure, internal  
40 and external. The process at work is something like that in which  
41

profilers for police agencies take a photograph of a person missing for years, apply known principles for the way people's faces change over time, and come up with a reasonable approximation to what the missing person would look like now. So also, with the second scenario, one holds the mainstream practices steady while adding to them the current practices of literary Darwinism. To make literary Darwinism fit comfortably into the culture of casebooks, one need only standardize its current tendencies toward vulgarity. The third scenario allows us to stipulate the conditions for rebuilding literary knowledge from the ground up, but by its very nature as a progressive, empirical discipline, it exceeds prediction. It promises discovery, things not yet dreamed of, lying latent in the bosom of reality, at levels of causal structure we have not yet penetrated, and at levels of complexity we do not yet, perhaps, have the skills even to envision. If one were able to travel back in time, visit some far-seeing investigator in the Renaissance, an astronomer, say, or an anatomist, take him by the elbow and give him a tour of the modern world, would it not all seem to him truly alien, strange, wonderful beyond all imagining? And yet, all these wonders were lying latent in the world, and he would himself have been taking the first steps toward their discovery.

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