

# **Evolutionary and Neurocognitive Approaches to Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts**

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## CHAPTER 3

# The Adaptive Function of Literature

*Joseph Carroll*

What those vast cerebral expansions that emerged during the Pleistocene probably provided was a vast symbolic capacity that enabled foresight, hindsight, and the brain-power to peer into other minds and to entertain alternate courses of action, thereby allowing humans to create the cultures that dominate our modern world. . . .

What makes humans unique, perhaps more than anything else, is that we are a linguistically adept story-telling species. That is why so many different forms of mythology have captivated our cultural imaginations since the dawn of recorded history (Panksepp & Panksepp, 2000, pp. 126-127).

Literature is only a special case of artistic activity, but its artistic medium is language, and that makes it a case of exceptional interest. Darwin himself boldly conjectured that the development of language was the single most important factor in the evolution of the modern human mind, and similar conjectures have been formulated within the context of the most recent knowledge about human evolution (see Bickerton, 2002; Bradshaw, 2002; Darwin, 1981; Dunbar, 1993; Mellars, 1996; Mithen, 1998; Stringer & Gamble, 1993.) Language is a medium both of knowledge and of social interaction. Through language we come to understand the world in forms abstracted from the sensory present, extending over time, and organized into conceptual classes and relationships. And through language, more than through any other device available to us, we negotiate our social relations with one another—share our thoughts and feelings, bond, dominate, submit, order, inquire, and otherwise manipulate each other. Literature assimilates all these

language functions and turns them to the general purposes of art. (The arts of language are oral in their inception but have been extended into "literature" by the prosthetic device of writing. In what follows, I shall speak only of "literature," but shall ask you always to understand that word as shorthand for the concept "literature and its oral antecedents.") The most general purpose that literature fulfills is that of creating emotionally charged images of our experience in the world. By means of such images, we orient ourselves to the world, organize our own sense of values and motives, and thus regulate our behavior. Our linguistic communities form spheres of action. Through the medium of verbal imagination, literature makes vividly present to us both the nature of those communities and our own place within them.

In previous publications (Carroll, 1995, 2004), I have identified literature as a form of "cognitive mapping," meaning that literature is a special case of the general function of intelligence—that of orienting the individual organism to the environment. The kinds of verbal representations we call literature differ from science and other forms of cognitive mapping that are purely factual in orientation. Unlike science and practical records, plans, and directives, literature is not impersonal. It incorporates the subjective, emotional, or qualitative aspect of human experience in two specific ways. First, whatever the subject of a literary representation might be, that subject is seen from a perspective that is imbued with passion and value. It is made meaningful to human needs, to desires, fears, and the sense of wonder. Second, very often human beings are the subjects of the representation. Even when the subjects are mythical creatures or animals, they are almost always anthropomorphized in such a way that they are only slightly displaced versions of human creatures—creatures acting with recognizable human passions and perceiving the world with sense organs, affective responses, and conceptual categories much like our own.

The views I am propounding about the adaptive function of literature presuppose that both the mind in general and literature in particular actually have an adaptive function. That assumption distinguishes these views from the two other chief hypotheses that have been put forward to account for the evolutionary origin of art: Geoffrey Miller's theory (2000) that the human brain and its artistic manifestations are both products of "sexual selection," and Steven Pinker's theory (1997) that art is a parasitic by-product of other cognitive functions that are themselves adaptive. Before explaining more fully the implications of my own adaptationist hypothesis, I shall examine these two competing ideas.

Miller has argued that the hypertrophic human mind did not evolve to serve the general purposes of survival. It evolved instead, he suggests,

as an equivalent to the peacock's tail—as a showy but adaptively useless ornament designed only to attract members of the opposite sex. The peacock's tail is a handicap for the peacock—it has a certain metabolic cost and renders the peacock more visible and vulnerable to predators—but it is not a functionally complex organ, and it is evidently not very useful for any purpose other than of attracting peahens. The human brain is more metabolically expensive than the peacock's tail; and it is anatomically expensive also, making for a difficult and dangerous birth followed by a life easily susceptible to mortal injury. Most importantly, it is astonishingly, functionally, complex, and it is patently useful for all the general purposes of life—for finding food and shelter, warding off danger, using tools, and negotiating with conspecifics for the purposes of concerted collective action. The supposition that an organ of this character could have arisen purely as a form of sexual display is, on its face, so implausible as to barely warrant serious consideration.

If we move on from the brain in general to the question of art in particular, the supposition of sexual display is less immediately and grossly implausible, but is still weak and shaky on its own terms and has little positive explanatory power (see Dissanayake, this volume). It falsely implies that art is mainly an activity produced by young males as part of their mating repertory, and though it says nothing in particular about what art actually contains or does—about its subjects, its techniques, or its effects—it implies, wrongly, that the chief function of art would be the display of individual brilliancy and that this brilliancy would be of a sort most likely to stimulate the sexual response systems of nubile females. These implications bear little correspondence to the facts. Most art in its origins is probably closely bound up with religious ceremonies and rituals; it is collective, public, and communal. The subjects of art prominently include sex and mating, since they involve all matters of intense emotional concern among humans; but they also involve parenting, friendship, the forces of nature, war, spiritual awe, death, and any number of other possible human concerns not notably identified with sexual excitation. The audience for art is the human race—males and females, children, adolescents, young adults, the middle-aged, and the elderly.

Pinker has a dual thesis about the evolutionary origins of art. Unlike Miller, he presupposes that the brain and mind evolved to solve adaptively important problems. In keeping with the cognitive science bent of orthodox evolutionary psychology, he treats the brain as an information processing device, and he tends to regard this device in a mechanistic and utilitarian light. The brain is there, like a computer, to generate information in the most efficient and accessible way. The information it generates concerns food, danger, sex, and social exchange. The brain

needs to get a certain amount of work done, and the most efficient way to accomplish any given task is to automate it: to render it the reliable outcome of predictable stimuli triggering "proximal" mechanisms—neurological, hormonal, physiological—that produce appropriate adaptive behaviors. The presence of hunger triggers foraging or hunting behavior; the sight of nubile females triggers mating behavior. The presence of conspecifics triggers social exchange mechanisms and so on. Once such proximate mechanisms are in place, they can be triggered by stimuli introduced artificially and produce results that have no direct adaptive advantage. For instance, pornographic images can stimulate sexual response mechanisms. Sexual excitation not directed toward effective reproductive activity would be a parasitic by-product of a proximal mechanism originally "designed" for adaptive purposes.

Pinker's theory of art locates it within both the areas of brain activity he identifies: utilitarian information processing and parasitic by-products. In his view, as a source of utilitarian information, the arts, and especially literature, can be adaptively functional. Literary scenarios can present simulacra of adaptively important information—practical information about the environment, the location of resources or danger, and the behavior of conspecifics (also see Sugiyama, 2001). Pinker himself does not go into detail about the functions of narrative form, but one could easily enough fill out this part of the argument with suppositions—like those of Jerome Bruner (1990) or Mark Turner (1996)—that the mind most easily and normally processes information in narrative form. In addition to this utilitarian function, in its guise as a parasitic by-product, art would activate cognitive responses—sensory and conceptual—that had evolved for more functional purposes. Music would parasitize hearing, for example, and the aesthetic aspects of literature would parasitize the faculties of language.

The two functions Pinker assigns to art are in fact part of what art can do. Literary art can and does provide practical information. After finishing *Madame Bovary*, I earnestly vowed that if I ever chose to commit suicide, I would find some method less gruesome than that of swallowing arsenic. Art can also provide pornographic stimulation or the equivalent of that in various kinds of wish-fulfillment fantasies. (Like Freud, Pinker thinks of verbal narratives primarily as forms of wish fulfillment.) In "The Kugelmass Episode," Woody Allen has a character enabled, by magical means, to enter into the world of *Madame Bovary* in order to have intimate sexual relations with the title character. Pinker is not wrong in identifying these functions of literature—that of conveying practical information and that of serving to stimulate pleasurable fantasies as a form of hedonistic self-exploitation—but as an account of the evolutionary origins and the

psychological functions of art, this account is drastically incomplete. It fails to get to the heart of the matter.

Much of the information conveyed in literature is of no direct practical utility, and if practical information were the only point at issue, much of that information could be conveyed more effectively by other means. (I did not need to read a long novel to learn that there are ways to kill one's self less horrible than that of taking arsenic.) Pleasurable fantasy is a relatively minor form of artistic activity, and it can hardly account for tragedy or for any painful realist representation. The death of Hercules in the fiery shirt of Nessus can satisfy the pornographic lusts of very few people, and almost no one closes *Madame Bovary* with the satisfied sense of having lived a vicarious life more thrilling and charming than his or her own. (The liaison in "The Kugelmass Episode," predictably enough, did not work out very well.) No reader or theatergoer has much to be pleasurably gratified about at the end of *Electra*, *King Lear*, or *L'Assomoir*, except in the cessation of torment, anguish, and grief.

Though Pinker himself tends to regard literature as primarily a form of wish fulfillment, his theory does not absolutely require that literature consist solely of pleasurable fantasy. It requires only that literature hijack cognitive processes that might have evolved to fulfill adaptive functions to which literature does not directly contribute. Likely candidates for these supposedly more primary processes would include language, mechanisms for sequencing events, and mechanisms of social exchange. The success of the hijacking would depend on activating the sources of pleasure with which those adaptive functions are associated—for instance, the pleasures of speech, the linking of ideas into sequences, and social grooming. The hijacking hypothesis offers a causal, evolutionary explanation different from the idea that art has an intrinsic adaptive function, but the hijacking hypothesis does not contain any arguments that preclude or undermine the idea of an intrinsic adaptive function. The two hypotheses, the idea of art as hijacking and the idea of an intrinsic adaptive function to art, are simply alternative, competing evolutionary hypotheses about the origin and nature of art. If we can identify good reasons for believing that art has intrinsic adaptive functions, those reasons would take precedence over arguments that fail to identify such functions but that also fail to stipulate reasons such functions could not exist.

In order to gain an adequate understanding about the adaptive function of literature and to assimilate whatever is worth keeping in the ideas of practical information and pleasurable cognitive stimulation, we must invoke a fundamental principle of adaptive design—the principle of costs and trade-offs. Every adaptation has its costs—metabolic

costs, opportunity costs, dangers, and limitations. Any adaptation that is maintained in relative stability does so not because it is a perfect design, but because it constitutes a stable tension between costs and benefits within a relatively stable ecology. The human brain is the most metabolically expensive organ in the human body, and our best understanding of the benefits this organ provides, sufficient to counterbalance its costs, is that it enables humans to respond flexibly and intelligently to the challenges of a variable environment. That general hypothesis has a certain *prima facie* plausibility, and over the past several years evolutionary anthropology and cognitive archaeology have been giving support, in depth and detail, to that commonsense understanding of the matter (see Foley, 1996; Irons, 1998; MacDonald & Hershberger, 2004; Potts, 1998). Animals vary in the degree to which they are ecologically specialized. Koalas, at one end of the scale, can live only on eucalyptus leaves. Humans, at the other end, have become so flexibly capable of adapting to almost any environment that they can reasonably be said to have specialized, as a species, in adaptive flexibility. Their upright posture and opposable thumbs have contributed to that specialization, but overwhelmingly the most important component of it is the large human brain, with its capacity for abstracting from local detail, identifying complex and hierarchically organized goals at many removes from any immediately perceived object, and adapting means to ends through logically organized sequences.

Such advantages do not come cheaply. In addition to the metabolic expense, the increased danger of childbirth, and the labor and risk attendant on extended childhood dependency, the human mind presents one disadvantage that is intrinsic to its very character as an organ of mental flexibility: the disadvantage attendant to confusion. The key aptitude in cognitive flexibility is the capacity to detach observation and reflection from programmed sequences of stimulus and response. To the modern human mind, alone among all minds in the animal kingdom, the world does not present itself as a series of rigidly defined stimuli releasing a narrow repertory of stereotyped behaviors. It presents itself as a vast and perplexing array of percepts and contingent possibilities. The human mind is free to organize the elements of its perception in an infinitely diverse array of combinatorial possibilities. And most of those potential forms of organization, like most major mutations, would be fatal. Freedom is the key to human success, and it is also an invitation to disaster. This is the insight that governs E. O. Wilson's penetrating explanation for the adaptive function of the arts. "There was not enough time for human heredity to cope with the vastness of new contingent possibilities revealed by high intelligence. . . . The arts filled the gap" (Wilson, 1998, p. 225).

If instincts are defined as stereotyped programs of behavior released automatically by environmental stimuli, then we can say that in humans, art takes the place of instinct. That does not mean what the cultural constructionists would have it mean—that culture is autonomous and infinitely various, and that it generates all motive and content in human experience. Humans have flexible response systems, but those systems are still constrained and guided by what Wilson (1998) calls "epigenetic rules" and what Kevin MacDonald (1995) calls "evolved motive dispositions." Cultures vary widely in the way they prepare food, but no culture varies in the need to prepare food, and beneath superficial differences in food sources and styles of preparation, the variation in food all over the world is strictly constrained by the universal properties of the human gustatory and digestive systems. In no culture do humans consume wood, as termites do.

The function of literature and the other arts is to fashion an imaginative universe in which the forces at work both in the environment and inside human beings are brought into subjectively meaningful relations to one another. That is not the same thing as providing practically useful information or providing an objectively accurate map of the external environment. A subjectively meaningful cognitive map can directly influence motives and values, but more broadly it provides points of reference within which humans can adjust their sense of the relative value and significance of all the emotionally and motivationally significant aspects of their experience. Literature and the other arts are devices of orientation, like compasses, sextants, and sonar, and they are vital to personal development, to the integration of individual identities within a cultural order, and to the imaginative adjustment of the individual to the whole larger world in which he or she lives.

Because they have vital adaptive functions, literature and the other arts are themselves motivated as emotionally driven needs. The need to produce and consume imaginative artifacts is as real and distinct a need as hunger, sex, or social interaction. Like all such needs, it bears within itself, as its motivating mechanism, the impetus of desire and the pleasure and satisfaction that attend upon the fulfilling of desire. That kind of fulfillment is not a parasitic by-product of some other form of pleasure, nor merely a means toward the end of fulfilling some other kind of need—sexual, social, or practical. Like all forms of human fulfillment, the need for art can be integrated with other needs in any number of ways. It can be used for sexual display or the gratifications of sexual hunger or social vanity, and it can be used as a medium for social bonding, but it is nonetheless, in itself, a primary and irreducible human need.

Literature represents and articulates human experience. In order to understand how literature works, we have to understand human nature. Human nature is the source of literature, and also its central subject matter. So, what is human nature? For the nearly three millennia of our preserved literary history, information on that subject has been given to us by poets, dramatists, storytellers, philosophers, and sages of all sorts. The majority of all literary writers and literary theorists have at some point invoked "human nature" as their central point of reference, the authority for their utterance, and the norm through which they justify one depiction for its truth, and condemn another for its falsity. What is it to which these authors and theorists are appealing? When authors or ordinary people say, "Oh, that's just human nature," what do they have in mind? They almost always have in mind the basic set of motivational dispositions that regulate human life history—the basic animal and social motives: self-preservation, sexual desire, jealousy, maternal love, the favoring of kin, the need to belong to social groups, and the desire for social status. Usually, certain universal characteristics of social morality are also meant: the resentment of wrongs, the gratitude for kindness, the intuitive sense of the integrity of contractual relations, the disgust at cheating, the naturalness of revenge, and the appropriateness of reciprocal generosity. And finally, all of these substantive motives are complicated and elaborated by the ideas that enter into the folk understanding of ego psychology: the primacy of self-interest and the prevalence of self-serving delusion, manipulative deceit, vanity, and hypocrisy (for adaptationist perspectives on this aspect of human nature, see Buss, 2001; Hogan, 1983).

As this third set of aspects suggests, the casual conversational phrase, "Oh, that's just human nature" has very often something of a cynical ring to it, but the weight of evaluation can also be placed on the positive side of the scale. Viewing an act of selfish deceit, one would not be surprised to hear the comment, "Well, that's just human nature," but neither would it be surprising to hear that phrase used to account for filial love, tender gratitude, admiration for honest dealing, and indignation at injustice (on the moral content of human nature, see Arnhart, 1998; Frank, 1988; J. Q. Wilson, 1993). Literature can emphasize either tonality, satiric contempt, or affirmative warmth, and in literature, as in life, one often hears both tonalities intermingled, as it is in the work of most canonical English novelists, where bitter depictions of cruelty and duplicity alternate with strong portraits affirming generosity, affection, and decency.

The literary and philosophical traditions articulate a folk knowledge of human nature. Until very recently, that folk knowledge was a source of psychological information superior to anything available within the

established academic disciplines of the social sciences. In *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1981), Darwin offered a pioneering effort to analyze human motives and human social psychology within the context of evolutionary anthropology. The result was a work of genius and a classic of moral psychology, a work that still richly repays careful study. But the actual knowledge available to Darwin about the details of human evolution were scanty, and psychology, as an empirical discipline, did not yet exist. For a period of about 40 years, from the time of *Descent of Man* up to the second decade of the twentieth century, some anthropologists, psychologists, and literary authors explored the evolutionary and naturalistic dimensions of human nature; but that sort of psychology was still largely speculative and "humanistic" in character. Beginning in about the second decade of the twentieth century, an anti-evolutionary revolution took place in the social sciences, and for all the middle decades of the century, up until the 1970s, the bulk of all work done in cultural anthropology and psychology, to say nothing of sociology and political science, was oriented not to an evolutionary understanding of human nature but rather to the false idea of cultural autonomy—the idea that human culture had decisively severed all connections between biological constraint and human motives and cognitions (see Degler, 1991). The chief alternatives to mainstream cultural constructivism in humanist psychology were the speculative and often deeply erroneous conceptions of Freud and the equally speculative, highly suggestive, but more diffuse and mystical speculations of Jung. The sociobiological revolution that began in the 1970s has now made it possible, for the first time in our history, to begin to construct an objective, empirically derived framework of knowledge about human nature. For the first time, as a result, it is now possible to create a framework for literary criticism that is independent of the folk traditions of human nature that are embedded in literature and philosophy.

The new Darwinian framework is independent of the folk tradition, but it is also integral and continuous with that tradition. The literary folk traditions are constituted by the intuitions of the best minds in our cultural history. Those intuitions, in their collective mass, are not simply wrong. As a general guide to human nature, they are certainly more reliable and adequate than any of the theoretically misguided or idiosyncratic and highly charged psychological systems that emerged in the behaviorist and psychoanalytic traditions. Nonetheless, in the works of all individual authors, the manifestations of folk intuitions are likely to be limited and biased, constrained and partially distorted, both by the specific cultural ecologies in which they are produced and also by the peculiarities of the authors' individual temperaments. No single



literary text can bear within itself a comprehensive and fully adequate framework of knowledge within which to assess itself. A critic who wishes to give an independent analysis of a literary text—something more than a summary and paraphrase—has no choice but to create some kind of framework that is not simply identical with the structure of meanings within that text.

Until the present time, in the absence of a scientifically grounded knowledge of human nature, all interpretive literary study had only one of two alternatives: (a) either to operate impressionistically within the general lexicon of folk literary knowledge, assessing each individual work in relation to that general pool; or (b) to adopt some speculative, theoretical system as a framework, and to use it either in a purely discursive, intuitive way or to follow some pseudosystematic elaboration of technical terms. The former alternative is that of old-fashioned, humanistic, belle-lettristic criticism. With heavy admixtures of mystical, romantic philosophy, and with some attention to commonsense methods in the formal analysis of images, tone, theme, and linguistic structures, that alternative formed the basis for what was known as the "New Criticism," the school of interpretive literary criticism that dominated academic literary study from the 1940s through the 1970s (see Abrams, 1997). Alongside the New Criticism, the second alternative, that of speculative theory, functioned as a loyal opposition or robust minority, under the aegis of various theoretical systems, but most prominently and persistently under those of Freud, Marx, and Jung. (For instance, Lionel Trilling, one of the chief belle-lettristic literary essayists of the midcentury period, was a devoted Freudian; the magisterial and massively influential scholar Edmund Wilson was closely affiliated with Marxism; and the chief literary taxonomist of the twentieth century, Northrop Frye, was heavily dependent on the archetypal psychology of Jung.)

In the past 25 years or so, old-fashioned belle-lettristic impressionism has been relegated to the casual reviewing of books and movies. In academic criticism, Jung has now all but disappeared, but Freud and Marx flourish more strongly than ever. They would not themselves, presumably, be very happy with the uses to which their concepts have been put. They were both scientific materialists and determinists, and in current literary study, their ideas about psychological and social organization have been assimilated into the radically irrationalist and antirealist doctrines of poststructuralism—doctrines derived from French theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. Poststructuralist notions have now, for at least two decades, dominated academic literary study, and those notions have actively and aggressively suppressed the idea of an underlying biologically

constrained human nature. The two key tenets of poststructuralism are the idea that language or "discourse" creates reality and the idea that all meaning is "indeterminate" or infinitely ambiguous. Within this scheme of things, all of science is itself nothing more than a cultural discourse designed to support oppressive and arbitrary structures of political power.

Any literary theorist who advocates a Darwinian or adaptationist theory of literary study necessarily steps outside the range of post-structuralist doctrine that currently dominates literary study and steps instead into the range of "consilience": the idea of the unity of all knowledge within the framework of modern science. For the purposes of literary study, what a Darwinian understanding of human nature can provide is a framework of analysis that is concordant with the phenomenal or phenotypic surface of representations in literary texts but that is more adequate, as causal explanation, than any single depiction of human nature in any literary work, or any single conception of human nature in the mind of any individual author. The Darwinian understanding of human nature is more adequate, as causal explanation, than the explanations within literary works because it is more general, more complete, more analytical, more ideologically neutral, more empirically grounded, and more adequately integrated with the total body of scientific knowledge.

Literary authors before 1859 could themselves hardly have been evolutionary adaptationists, and even now many authors have still not concerned themselves seriously with the anthropological and biological underpinnings of the behavior they intuitively depict and the motives and feelings they intuitively express. But human nature is the common medium, the *lingua franca*. It is the currency in which authors must trade if they are to make connections with the intuitive understanding of their audience. Individual authors can and do deviate in all sorts of ways from populational averages, just as individual people do. There is nonetheless a recognized common ground—common motives, common forms of emotional response, and common forms of perception, observation, and reflection. All differences of temperament or sensibility register themselves and have meaning for us by reference to that common ground. Our individual identities, with their peculiarities of culture and temperament, are like cottages scattered around the edge of a village common. Each cottage has its differences of shape or furnishing, but each shares the common features that are derived from commonality of materials, of historical origins, and of function. In all the cottages, design subserves the basic needs of shelter and domestic organization, and the life that is carried on in each is linked, by shared interests and occupations, to the communal life of the village.

Literature is in one crucial respect unlike many subjects of scientific study. Rocks, chemicals, electromagnetic waves—all of those are insentient phenomena. Literary texts are intentional structures of meaning. In this respect, literary study closely parallels the modern personality theory that is based on “lexical analysis”—the statistical analysis of words from the dictionary that define features of personality (see John & Srivastava, 1999; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996). Authors speak their minds and know what they are saying. In interpreting literary utterances, as in interpreting the utterances of people with whom we converse, we might well posit motives or implications of which the author is not conscious. And in interpreting the utterances of authors, as in interpreting the utterances of other people, we are free to explain or judge the utterances in whatever way seems best to us. We seldom simply concur, in neutral and passive accord, with what anyone says, in books or in life.

An author has a meaning, and a reader assesses that meaning. Where then does meaning reside? In the author’s intentional structure of meaning? In the reader’s encompassing meditation on that meaning? In both. The author’s intentional structure of meaning is like an object studied by science, a rock or chemical. As scholars, we have a primary obligation to give as exact and faithful an account of that meaning as possible. We should never say an author “meant to say” something other than what that author meant to say—so far as we can judge of that—but having given a faithful account of what the author meant to say, we are free to encompass that intentional utterance within the larger, more comprehensive framework of our own analytic and interpretive structures, including our attributions of motives that might have animated the author and our assessment of implications the author might himself or herself indignantly repudiate. People do not always wish to acknowledge the scope or drift of what they say, or take responsibility for it; and authors, whatever else might be said about them, are people.

Admission into the canon is like admission into an athletic hall of fame; it is a virtual guarantee of certain kinds of excellence. Canonical literary authors are demonstrably figures of genius. They have wide observation, penetrating insight, towering imaginative power, and preternatural faculties of articulate utterance. Few individual literary critics are ever in a position to claim that their individual perspectives are more comprehensive, more encompassing, than those of individual authors. Literary criticism will always require talent and insight, but science is a collective enterprise, and in using the consilient framework of adaptationist knowledge about human nature, individual literary critics have recourse to a collective understanding that is greater than

the understanding of any single individual, no matter how great a mind that individual might have. That collective understanding is the synthetic product of the combined efforts of whole communities of research extending over generations. By participating in that collective understanding—including its ethos of empirical constraint and its chastity of factual affirmation—individual literary critics and scholars can rightly claim to encompass the works of genius and to submit those works to scientific observation and analysis.

In literary texts, “point of view” has a special status as the central locus of meaning. In the most narrowly restricted, technical sense, “point of view” means only the formal method an author adopts for the purposes of narrating a story. In that sense, a story can be told “in the first person,” from an “omniscient third-person perspective,” or from various modifications of third-person or participant perspectives (see Booth, 1996). In a broader sense, “point of view” signifies the total set of meanings and observations that characterize an individual mind—the characteristic values and styles, the forms of perception, the emotional tone, the conceptual repertory. In that sense, the meaning of intentional structures in a literary text is the articulation of a specific point of view: that of the author.

In most literary texts, other points of view are also represented. Indeed, they are the chief subjects of representation. Characters act or behave, but they also think and feel, and their thoughts and feelings are ultimately of more account, in the construction of meaning, than their acts. In most literary works, there are multiple points of view. The various characters interact, as people do in life. They intuit each others’ feelings and motives, or try to; they try to persuade or otherwise manipulate each other; and they judge each other. The author himself or herself has a point of view, and that point of view has ultimate authority within the text. Within the author’s own intentional structure of meaning, the point of view of each character derives its significance from its relation to the author’s point of view. It is the author who gets to impose the ultimate, encompassing interpretation of the represented events. It is the author who decides what things mean.

Whatever their other motives might be, characters, authors, and readers share one fundamental motive: the need to affirm a certain understanding of the world. All human beings have that need, and satisfying that need is the central, irreducible motive in all literary art. In the absence of instinctive, stereotyped response, humans are compelled to locate their action within some imaginative context, and literature is one of the chief forms through which such contexts are created. All individual literary representations instantiate an emotionally charged understanding of the world. Articulating that



understanding satisfies the mind of the artist, and the primary motive readers have for reading is to participate in that understanding and to share in that satisfaction. As common readers, Darwinian literary critics enjoy and appreciate literature in this primary way. As scholars, they also seek to encompass literary works within the explanatory context derived from an adaptationist understanding of human nature.

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