



Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s): *Evolution and Literary Theory* by Joseph Carroll

Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 94, No. 3, (Feb., 1997), pp. 350-354

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/438579>

Accessed: 15/08/2008 09:07

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BOOK REVIEWS

Evolution and Literary Theory. *Joseph Carroll*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995. Pp. xi+518.

The anthropologist Robin Fox recently told me that his friend E. O. Wilson, the Harvard entomologist and sociobiologist, had thought of calling his just-published book of autobiographical reminiscences “Memoirs of a Vampire-Killer.” The vampires in question—the “still-walking dead,” as Wilson described them—are all those academics in the various life sciences who continue to deny an innate (i.e., genetic) component to human nature and behavior. Wilson’s book *Sociobiology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975) had argued aggressively for that component, relating human beings to the rest of evolved animal life; his Pulitzer Prize-winning *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978) had made a thrillingly compelling case, putting its author in the ranks of such eminent twentieth-century Darwinists as George C. Williams, J. B. S. Haldane, and Konrad Lorenz. Behavioral and developmental genetics are steadily vindicating Wilson, a fact with which readers of the popular press are generally, though often vaguely, familiar.¹

The news has not penetrated to the humanities, however, where the walking dead continue to rule. There a “constructivist” ideology is firmly in place, one that ascribes to virtually every aspect of human life a “cultural” etiology. It confidently preaches (under the aegis of such influential theorists as Donna Haraway) that nature itself is merely a “cultural construction.” The authority for such pronouncements is principally derived from the facile assumptions of poststructuralism, assumptions

1. For a fascinating account of the first scientific study decisively proving genetic linkage to a complex human behavior—in this case, male homosexuality—see Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland, *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior* (New York, 1994).

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that, as Frederick Crews has noted, are now usually “treated as self-evidently valid within those cutting-edge schools of practice—feminist, Marxist, gay and lesbian, ethnic, psychoanalytic, new historicist—that seek to highlight and favor previously suppressed interests within both literature and society.”² Because subversive politics and poststructuralism have been conflated, and literary academics have been led to assume what Crews calls “a necessary connection” between “theory” (my quotation marks) and “radical virtue,” it is the rare literary critic and rarer theorist who challenges poststructuralist assumptions.³ And that critic who gives sympathetic attention to a body of neo-Darwinian theory like Wilson’s sociobiology is simply nonexistent. About Wilson, humanists know (if they know nothing else) that he was once rebuked for his ideological heterodoxy by a group of young Marxists who, at a conference where Wilson was a featured speaker, poured a pitcher of water over his head. And when Marxists rebuke, literary critics listen.

Into this climate comes Joseph Carroll and his new book *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Carroll is thoroughly informed about all the chief schools of contemporary literary theory, he is formidably well read in literature itself, and, unlike almost every other theorist, he has familiarized himself with all the latest developments in those biological sciences that are stealthily encircling Transylvania. Carroll is harshly critical of poststructuralism and fiercely loyal to evolutionary thought, and the result is a rout of the vampires and a triumph for the Darwinists. Both his critique and his loyalty follow upon his highly unorthodox and all but unique humanistic intellectual orientation—one that puts truth first, especially empirically verifiable truth, and political correctness second.

His is an ambitious, complex, important, and timely project. Not only does he subject such postmodernist luminaries and their epebes as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Richard Rorty, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Stephen Greenblatt, and others to searching and corrosive scrutiny, but he also erects a counterstructure to their (often anti-)foundationalist premises that is firmly grounded in empirical research and evolutionary theory. In the first enterprise he demonstrates—to my mind, with unimpeachable evidence and logic—that “poststructuralism is based on philosophical principles that are . . . radically unsound and that conflict with the total structure of scientific knowledge, especially biological knowledge” (p. 54). As he shows, poststructuralist argument maintains a semblance of plausibility largely

2. Frederick Crews, “Foreword,” *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*, ed. Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling (Evanston, Ill., 1993), p. vii.

3. *Ibid.*, p. vii.

through its shifting rhetorical tactics—through the elusive “verbal ballet” (p. 411) of Foucault, for example, or the “truistic/radical shuffle” (p. 56) of Derrida or Greenblatt, wherein logical absurdities are first tendered, then withdrawn, behind a curtain of truistic qualification. If the book had been restricted to these analyses alone, it would have been a valuable addition to the growing literature of what we may call antipoststructuralist dissent.

But Carroll’s constructive paradigm puts him far in advance of such purely critical dissenters as John Ellis (*Against Deconstruction* [Princeton, N.J., 1989]), Richard Freadman and Seamus Miller (*Re-Thinking Theory* [Cambridge and New York, 1992]), and François Roustang (*The Lacanian Delusion* [Oxford, 1990]). Arguing that evolution “is a more complete and adequate theory of the development and nature of life, including human life, than any other theory currently available to us” (p. 467), he rightly insists that the “theorizing” of literature be conducted squarely within its premises. His first principles are straightforward:

I shall argue that the primary purpose of literature is to represent the subjective quality of experience. In opposition to the post-Kantian notion that cognitive and linguistic categories are autonomous forms that constitute their own objects, I shall argue, in company with Karl Popper, Konrad Lorenz, Tooby and Cosmides, John Bowlby, and other evolutionary theorists, that cognitive and linguistic categories have evolved in adaptive relation to the environment. They correspond to the world not because they “construct” the world in accordance with their own autonomous, internal principles but because their internal principles have evolved as a means of comprehending an actual world that exists independently of the categories. (P. 3)

What he means by “subjective quality of experience” is explained in the central fifth chapter of part 1, “A Model of Possible Thematic Models”: “Each work of literature is . . . a cognitive map produced by the mind of an author” (p. 225). That “map” lays out “a total conceptual order, that is, a . . . model that represents the elements the world comprises and the relations among these elements” (p. 223). In other words, every author will thematize his or her preoccupations within a comprehensive set of nested categories that reflects the evolutionist’s sense of the hierarchical organization of life: the individual, the heterosexual couple, the family, society, the specifically human life, life in general, the cosmos.⁴ These categories are neither linguistic nor cultural “constructions,” and—this is Carroll’s more radical claim—they are all delimited and constrained by the facts of human biology: “I

4. That Carroll marginalizes homosexual experience as a literary subject will be one of the most controversial aspects of his book. He justifies his doing so, in part, with these

argue that innate dispositions, the result of an evolutionary process of adaptation, influence every aspect of human identity: sensory perception, cognition, the acquisition of language, the psychophysiological structure of personality, sexual identity, family functions, the organization of individuals in social structures, and the relation of human beings to the nonhuman world of physical nature" (p. 150).

Space unfortunately does not permit a discussion that can do justice to Carroll's elaboration and application of such a model. It must suffice here to say that both are rigorous, provocative, and extremely persuasive. My only regret—one that may in fact surprise Carroll, and annoy those readers whom his orientation already offends—is that he is not a more thoroughgoing evolutionist than he is. Carroll obviously loves literature, and his respect for the humanistic values of the great Victorian writers borders (perhaps properly) upon veneration. But his love and respect sometimes lead him into extravagances that evolutionary thinking could have checked. Greater writers are, for Carroll, "geniuses" of "wisdom" who "live on the mountain peaks and call to each other across the intervening valleys" (p. 199); language occupies the same heights, he implies, quoting Thomas Henry Huxley: "Mankind . . . 'stands raised upon [speech] as on a mountain top, far above the level of his humble fellows, and transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth'" (p. 258). But writers, even the greatest, can be just as fallible as any other hairless primate, and language can be as efficient in evasion and deception (as Carroll ruthlessly demonstrates with respect to post-structuralist "discourse") as in the promulgation of truth. Carroll's humanism also makes him impatient with those whom he calls "strict" sociobiologists (p. 364)—theorists like Richard Dawkins and Robert Trivers who have emphasized the self-serving nature of human altruism. But I think he is wrong to conclude that those emphases "do not allow for sympathy as an evolved psychological characteristic" (p. 365). Other sociobiologists have in fact argued that psychological mechanisms like love and sympathy have evolved precisely in the service of Trivers's and Dawkins's so-called selfish gene.⁵ These are quasi-technical

words: "All innate human psychological structures have, in ancestral environments, evolved under the regulative power of reproductive success and . . . these innate structures remain fully active at the present time. Perhaps the single most important corollary of this principle, for the purposes of literary analysis, is that reproductive success, in its twin aspects of sexual union and the production of successful offspring, is central to human concerns and thus to literary works. It provides an organizing principle that can be adjusted or modified or repressed (at great cost) but cannot simply be ignored" (p. 2).

5. See, e.g., Dennis Krebs, "The Challenge of Altruism in Biology and Psychology," in *Sociobiology and Psychology: Ideas, Issues, and Applications*, ed. Charles Crawford, Martin Smith, and Dennis Krebs (Hillsdale, N.J., 1987), pp. 81–118.

issues, but I raise them here because Carroll's attacks give succor to his enemies, and I think their gain is undeserved.

Carroll's book should be required reading for all students of literary theory. But I have few illusions about its receiving the attention it deserves in today's academic political climate, which may be best described, at least in English departments, as one of benevolent fascism. When the profession desists from fitting all of its members with the hair shirts of Marxist rectitude and begins thinking about literature and human life again with impartiality, *Evolution and Literary Theory* will be there to point the way.

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Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature, 800–1300. *D. H. Green*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xv+483.

Dennis Howard Green argues that the primary reception of literature in German during its earlier years was "mixed." That is, authors were aware of the likelihood that audiences would hear their works recited, and that some at least might read them, either to yet another audience or privately, and they composed accordingly. Thus Green's work might be seen in part as a response to M. G. Scholz, who argues that much Middle High German literature, particularly that produced by court authors, was intended for a reading audience (*Hören und Lesen: Studien zur primären Rezeption der Literatur im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* [Wiesbaden, 1980]). Green contends that authors were aware of an audience composed of both literates in German (and perhaps Latin) and nonliterates. These categories are variants of standard "oral/written," "literate/illiterate" binaries, but Green argues that such pairs are neither mutually exclusive nor of universal application as descriptions of the makeup of Germanic society, particularly in terms of modes of literary composition and reception.

The study is divided into three parts. "Part I: Preliminary Problems" sets the theoretical framework for investigating a literary culture in transition from being one in which texts are heard to one that includes the possibility of texts being read as well. The advent of German vernacular works is set in the context of a dominant Latin-literate culture. "Part II: Three Modes of Reception" is the study's center. Reception based on hearing, reading, and a mixture of both are explored in three pairs of chapters. The first chapter of each two-chapter set pro-