
BOOK REVIEWS

Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature

By **Joseph Carroll**. Routledge, 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001, info@routledge-ny.com, 2004, 276 pages, ISBN: 0415970148 [Paperback US\$23.95]

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The various essays, articles and book reviews comprising Joseph Carroll's *Literary Darwinism* are rooted in two principles: first, humans share a common nature that can be revealed through the scientific method; second, this universal nature is the product of relentless Darwinian selection over eons. While this is obviously orthodox stuff in the world of behavioral biology, these notions remain quite heretical among the social constructivists who continue to dominate the world of literary studies. From Carroll's simple principles flow corollaries with large implications for literary studies and behavioral biology. The most important corollary for literary scholars is that a large proportion of all that has been said, written, or merely thought in the realm of literary theory and criticism over the last several decades is obviously and often breathtakingly wrong. This is because all of the dominant "poststructuralist" approaches--Lacanian, Foucauldian, Marxist, radical feminist, deconstructionist, and others--are organized around an adamant core of social constructivist theory that is profoundly at odds both with Darwinian theory and with practical research in what Steven Pinker calls "the new sciences of human nature." As Carroll writes:

"The poststructuralist explanation of things cannot be reconciled with the Darwinian paradigm.... It operates on principles that are wholly different and fundamentally

incompatible with those of evolutionary theory. It should consequently be rejected. Let me face squarely the historical and institutional implications of this rejection. *If I am basically right in my contentions, a very large proportion of the work in critical theory that has been done in the last twenty years will prove to be not merely obsolete but essentially void. It cannot be regarded as an earlier phase of a developing discipline, with all the honor due to antecedents and ancestors. It is essentially a wrong turn, a dead end, a misconceived enterprise, a repository of delusions and wasted efforts*" [italics mine] (p. 25).

Carroll's argument is really quite simple. All literary criticism and theory is ultimately based on theories of human nature (even the theory that there is no such thing as human nature *is* a theory of human nature). Literary scholarship constructed on unsound theoretical foundations--on essentially faulty premises about human tendencies and potential--must itself be unsound, no matter how internally self-consistent. Which idea more successfully describes the source of *Oedipus Rex*'s enduring power--that Sophocles cannily manipulates secret incestuous desires or that he plays upon our evolved revulsion for incest? Which idea is more likely to serve as a successful starting point for exploring sexual and gender dynamics in literature--that sexuality and gender are arbitrary social constructions forced on us by patriarchs and capitalists or that they are co-determined by genetic as well as socio-cultural influences?

As the above excerpt suggests, Carroll is a scrapper who writes cruelly-honed polemic. But the writings that comprise *Literary Darwinism* are not mere violence against the soft target of contemporary literary theory and criticism. What distinguishes Carroll (see also *Evolution and Literary Theory* 1995) from some other writers who have ably exposed the failures and fatuities of poststructuralism, is that after bombing the poststructuralist edifice to dust, Carroll is able to offer the shell-shocked literary scholar a clearly superior alternative. The chapters of *Literary Darwinism* articulate Carroll's vision of a foundation-up reorganization of literary studies along

Darwinian lines. In place of the sophistry of the poststructuralists, the political advocacy of the Marxists and radical feminists, the equivocations and knotted circumlocutions of the deconstructionists, the defunct psychology of Freud and his epigones, and the laxities of purely unquantitative methodology, Carroll describes a Darwinian literary study where judgments about literary plots, characters, and themes are rooted in the bedrock of evolutionary theory, are disciplined by the findings of scientific research, and, when possible, are tested using scientific methods. (If anything Carroll's advocacy for quantitative methodology is more radical in the world of literary studies than his advocacy for Darwinian theory--see Part I, Chapter 3, "Theory, anti-theory, and empirical criticism.")

The big question, as Carroll himself recognizes, is whether literary scholars will embrace the opportunity offered in Darwinism or whether they will continue to scorn it-- whether literary studies as a discipline will collaborate in the large Darwinian project or whether it will continue down the road to total irrelevance in the progressive study of humans and their products. On this question, the jury is out. Darwinism has not taken literary studies (or the humanities generally) by storm, but Carroll's survey of a now substantial corpus of work in Darwinian literary study gives cause for cautious optimism (see introduction, *xv-xvii*). My own feeling, to loosely paraphrase Max Planck, is that Darwinism will eventually win out, but that constructivist inertia is so strong that it may only happen gradually, death by tenured death.

But Literary Darwinism is not limited to narrow questions concerning the academic study of literature. On the contrary, Carroll is as competent and sophisticated an evolutionist as he is a literary scholar, and his sixteen chapters (mostly previously published material that has been featured in journals as various as Evolution and Human Behavior, Human Nature, Philosophy and Literature, and the Times Literary Supplement) reflect his dual track mind. In addition to punishing attacks on the postmodern literary establishment (e.g., Part I, Chapter 2, "Biology and poststructuralism"), sweeping efforts to lay foundation stones for a systematic Darwinian theory of literature (e.g.,

Part II, Chapter 1, "The deep structure of literary representations" and Chapter 6, "Human nature and literary meaning"), and practical examples of what Darwinian literary criticism and evaluation look like (e.g., Part II, Chapter 3, "Human universals and literary meaning" and Chapter 5, "Adaptationist criteria of literary value"), Carroll enters debates that have been increasingly prominent in the world of behavioral biology. Specifically, several chapters address different pieces of the evolutionary puzzle of the human proclivity for art. In an ancestral environment characterized by intense struggle for survival and reproduction, how could the evolutionary process "allow" any animal to spend (waste?) so much time producing, elaborating and consuming art--time that could be spent pursuing mates and other quarry? This puzzle--akin in some ways to the puzzle of altruism (how does one account for behavior that produces such ostensibly unfavorable cost-benefit ratios?)--has recently attracted many prominent evolutionists who have argued either that art making/consumption is an adaptive product of natural selection (e.g. E. O. Wilson 1998, Tooby and Cosmides 2001), an adaptive product of sexual selection (Miller 2000), or that it is a non-adaptive by-product (e.g., Pinker 1997; Buss 1999, 407-410).

In short, Carroll takes the side of the adaptationists, favoring E. O. Wilson's argument in Consilience that "the arts are means by which we cultivate and regulate the complex cognitive machinery on which our more highly developed functions depend" (p.65; see also "Introduction," Part I, Chapter 6, "Pinker, Dickens, and the functions of literature," and Chapter 7, "Wilson's Consilience and literary study"). He reserves his severest criticism for Geoffrey Miller's sexual selection hypothesis, calling it "almost comically far fetched" (p. xx) and "provocative but ultimately frivolous" (p. xi).

My major disappointment with Carroll's treatment of this subject -- and this criticism applies equally to the other contributors to this literature -- is that he proposes no means by which his adaptive scenario could, even in principle, be subjected to scientific falsification. We have now arrived at a point where we have a multitude of plausible and clearly defined

competing hypotheses; those who ponder the adaptive significance of art should now put rhetorical duels aside and start generating predictions and conducting tests. Doing so will not be easy given the nature of the problem and the complexity of the evidence, but until this happens we will only be mongering just so stories.

Also of interest for evolutionists will be Carroll's criticism of prominent biographies of Darwin (Part III, Chapter 1, "The origin of Charles Darwin"—Carroll is a scholar of the life and work of Darwin who has recently produced a critical edition of *On the origin of species*, 2003), his critique of "orthodox" evolutionary psychology (Part II, Chapter 6, "Human nature and literary meaning," pp.190-206), his discussion of literary universals (Part II, Chapter 2), and his singularly comprehensive and devastating analysis of Stephen Jay Gould's crusade against sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and the whole modern synthesis (Part III, Chapter 2, "Modern Darwinism and the pseudo-revolutions of Stephen Jay Gould"). In this essay, Carroll draws a shrewd parallel between the charlatanism of poststructuralist literary scholars and that of Gould and Lewontin, but he considers the latter to be more dishonest: "Gould and Lewontin use the techniques of sophisticated equivocation in a virtuoso way, but they do not [like the poststructuralists] overtly and forthrightly declare that their purpose is to suspend the capacity for rational thought" (p.240).

In sum, Literary Darwinism is not only about preaching the Darwinian gospel to literary scholars. Rather, like Consilience, Carroll's book emphasizes that evolutionists have as much to gain from the study of literature as literary scholars have to gain from the study of evolution. As described above, the human propensity for art making and consumption represents an important evolutionary puzzle. Moreover, literature represents an inexhaustible, vastly underutilized, and cross-cultural reservoir of data about human behavior and psychology that can be used for quantitative and qualitative tests of evolutionary hypotheses (pp.145, 216). For instance, evolutionary hypotheses about sex differences have been tested through quantitative content

analyses of folk tales from diverse band and tribal societies (e.g., Gottschall, 2004a; 2004b), and Donald Symons and his collaborators have often turned to erotica as a rich source of information about human sexuality. Evolutionists who take the concept of consilience seriously will be interested in Literary Darwinism, which represents one of the most serious and sustained attempts to establish consilience between the humanities and behavioral biology— and to plumb its implications.

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