

# **POSTSTRUCTURALISM, CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY**

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Darwinian evolutionary theory has established itself as the matrix for all the life sciences. This theory situates human beings firmly within the natural, biological order, and evolutionary principles are now extending themselves rapidly into the human sciences: into epistemology, sociology, psychology, ethics, neurology, and linguistics. The rapidly developing and increasingly integrated group of evolutionary disciplines has resulted in an ever-expanding network of mutually illuminating and mutually confirming hypotheses about human nature and human society. If literature is in any way concerned with the language, psychology, cognition, and social organization of human beings, all of this information should have a direct bearing on our understanding of literature. It should inform our understanding of human experience as the subject of literature, and it should enable us to situate literary figurations in relation to the personal and social conditions in which they are produced. Up to this point, contemporary literary theory has not only failed to assimilate evolutionary theory, it has adopted a doctrinal stance that places it in irreconcilable conflict with the basic principles of evolutionary biology.

I shall describe the current critical paradigm, identify the basic principles in an evolutionary view of knowledge and of culture, outline a theory of literary figuration that corresponds to these larger evolutionary principles, explain how this theory of figuration conflicts with our current critical paradigm, and assess the motives and interests that have established our current critical paradigm as an orthodox creed within the professional institution of criticism.

### Textualism and Indeterminacy

The principles that dominate critical theory at the present time can be gathered together under the heading of "poststructuralism," a term here intended to indicate an essential continuity between the Derridean linguistic seventies and the Foucauldian political eighties. The central doctrines of poststructuralism are textualism and indeterminacy. Textualism is the idea that language or culture constitute or construct the world according to their own internal principles, and indeterminacy identifies all meaning as ultimately self-contradictory. Textualism treats of human beings and the world in which they live as the effects of a linguistic or cultural system, and indeterminacy reduces knowledge to the spontaneous generation of internal contradictions within this system. J. Hillis Miller offers a representative formulation of the textualist thesis. "We make things what they are by naming them in one way or another, that is, by the incorporation of empirical data into a conventional system of signs" (109). (Miller attributes this textualist doctrine, wrongly, to George Eliot.) Fredric Jameson offers a representative formulation of indeterminacy. "Poststructuralism,' or, as I prefer, 'theoretical discourse,' is at one with the demonstration of the necessary incoherence and impossibility of all thinking" (218).

Together, textualism and indeterminacy eliminate the two criteria of truth: the correspondence of propositions to their objects and the internal coherence of propositions. By affirming that texts do not refer to objects but rather constitute them, textualism eliminates correspondence, and by affirming that all meaning is ultimately contradictory indeterminacy eliminates coherence. By eliminating truth, poststructuralism yields epistemological and ontological primacy to rhetoric or "discourse," and it simultaneously delegitimizes all traditional norms. Since poststructuralism treats all norms as arbitrary, it has a convenient application within the field of radical political ideology. In its political aspect, poststructuralism typically treats of normative intellectual, moral, and social structures within the Western cultural tradition as fraudulent and oppressive—as purely conventional constructs that are designed to perpetuate the exploitative interests of social elites, particularly the interests of white male heterosexuals of the ruling classes.<sup>1</sup>

The elimination of truth can, of course, take effect only if one believes that the central poststructuralist doctrines are in fact true. In this sense, poststructuralism undermines the ground on which it

stands, but the larger poststructuralist position, deriving from the philosophy of Derrida, is that all propositions always undermine the ground on which they stand. Applying this principle specifically to the "law" of genre, Derrida provides a concise formulation of the principle in its broadest import.

What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason? (53)

The "law" of genre here constitutes only a more particular instance of the Law in general, that is, the general concept of sense, order, and reason. A central mission of Foucault's work is to apply this principle to the field of intellectual history or, as he calls it, "archaeology." "Archaeological analysis," he explains, "erects the primacy of a contradiction that has its model in the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a single proposition" (155). Synthesizing the principle of contradiction with textualism, Foucault offers an evocative formulation of the poststructuralist conception of discourse as a cosmic principle of linguisticized negativity. "All manifest discourse is secretly based on an 'already said,'" a "writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark . . . [T]he manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what what it does not say; and this 'not-said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said" (25). The "hollow"—along with its various synonyms such as the "abyss" and the "void"—serves for poststructuralists as a cosmic framework. Within this framework, the self-cancelling nature of poststructuralist repudiations of truth appear as merely exemplary instances of the general claim that incoherence and contradiction are the heart of an ultimate, linguistic reality—"the reality of discourse in general," as Foucault describes it (227). My own position, in contrast, is that the doctrines of textualism and indeterminacy are not true and that truth is itself the primary criterion in assessing the validity of all doctrines.

A fundamental premise of poststructuralist critical theory is that in all specific literary works meaning is preemptively determined by linguistic and cultural codes. Whether taken as purely semiotic textual systems or as ideological structures, from the poststructuralist perspective these codes appear to be constrained neither by individual identities nor by any natural order. To the contrary, the sense of individual identity and the concept of a natural order themselves appear as merely reflexive functions within autonomous sign systems. Under the aegis of deconstructive philosophy, these systems signify their own disconnection from any "ground" outside of themselves. Poststructuralists assimilate descriptive terms from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist political economy, but within the poststructuralist synthesis the material

<sup>1</sup>Using the term "postmodernism"—a common cultural equivalent for poststructuralist theory—John R. Searle describes the same doctrinal movement I am describing, and he registers the correlation between its political and philosophical aspects. He observes that along with their "explicitly leftist political agenda" (56) postmodernists challenge "the very conceptions of rationality, truth, objectivity, and reality" (55). Levin (1993) makes arguments similar to those of Searle and applies them more specifically to literary studies.

determinism of Freud and Marx dissolves into semiosis. Psychosexual and socioeconomic forces cease to be actual forces consisting of concrete circumstances and living agents and become instead components within signifying systems. Under the rubric of "postmodernism," Ihab Hassan describes this vision as one in which languages "reconstitute the universe . . . into signs of their own making, turning nature into culture, and culture into an immanent semiotic system" (508). As Jameson puts it, "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (ix). The postmodern world is one in which "culture" has become a veritable 'second nature.'" This new semiotic cosmology is "an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real, a quantum leap in what Benjamin still called the 'aestheticization' of reality" (x).

In contrast to poststructuralist epistemology, evolutionary epistemology presupposes that, in the formulation of Konrad Lorenz, "All human knowledge derives from a process of interaction between man as a physical entity, an active, perceiving subject, and the realities of an equally physical external world, the object of man's perception" (1). From this specifically biological perspective, meaning is determined, in the first place, not by linguistic and cultural codes that obey only their own internal principles but rather by physiological structures such as "the sense organs and central nervous system." Such structures "enable living organisms to acquire relevant information about the world and to use this information for their survival" (6). Lorenz sets this view of human knowledge in sharp contrast to the view of "transcendental idealists" who assume that "our modes of thought and perception" do not "correspond in the least with things as they really are" (7). Lorenz' views are similar to those of the philosopher Karl Popper, who holds that "Life is problem-solving and discovery." As adaptive organisms, we are concerned to know the truth. The purpose of science is to enable us to discover "a fuller, a more complete, a more interesting, logically stronger and more relevant truth"—relevant, that is, "to our problems" (148). Knowledge is always partial, hypothetical, conjectural, and provisional, but it can correspond more or less adequately to a world that exists independently of human beings.

### Biology and Figuration

To designate the total set of affective, conceptual, and aesthetic relations within a given literary construct, I shall use the term "figurative structure." Any element that can be abstracted from a figurative structure is *ipso facto* a figurative element. Thus, representations of people or objects, metrical patterns, rhyme schemes, overt propositional statements, figures of speech, syntactic rhythms, tonal inflections, stylistic traits, single words, and even single sounds are all elements of figuration. Figurative structure, like any other kind of structure, can be analyzed at any level of particularity. A primary concern of literary theory, then, must be to identify the level of analysis at which elements form meaningful units that join with other such units so as to fashion the larger structures of figuration. As the evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides rightly affirm,

Sciences prosper when researchers discover the level of analysis appropriate for describing and investigating their particular subject: when researchers discover the level where invariance emerges, the level of underlying order. What is confusion, noise, or random variation at one level resolves itself into systematic patterns upon the discovery of the level of analysis suited to the phenomena under study. (63)

In representations of human experience, the most important figurative elements are characters, settings, and plots (a connected sequence of events). For convenience, I shall refer to these elements collectively as the "dramatic" elements of figurative structures. These three elements are the central figurative units in drama, and in both narratives and lyric or meditative poetry the narrator's or speaker's own persona can also be identified as a "character." To be sure, the author's own relation to his story, as this relation is revealed in the narrator's or speaker's persona, is of the first importance in determining the total meaning of the represented action, but it is important precisely because the author, like the represented characters, is a distinct person—a locus for the organization of human experience. On this issue, the traditional wisdom has already identified the units of analysis appropriate to literary study. Until quite recently, character, setting, and plot have formed part of the common vocabulary of literary study, and narrative point of view has been one of the most commonly considered topics of formal analysis. Even the most determined deconstructive effort to repudiate the "subject" cannot avoid surreptitiously or paradoxically reintroducing

the concept of character into its analyses of dramatic representations.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional categories—character, setting, and plot—can be explained and validated by invoking the largest principles of an evolutionary critical paradigm. If the purpose of literature is to represent human experience, and if the fundamental elements of biological existence are organisms, environments, and actions, the figurative elements that correlate with these biological elements would naturally assume a predominant position within most figurative structures. Evolutionary theory can thus provide a sound rationale for adopting the basic categories, and it can also provide a means for extending our theoretical understanding of how these categories work within the total system of figurative relations. This theoretical understanding can in turn provide a means for assessing traditional explanations or applications of the categories and measuring their central presuppositions against those of an evolutionary paradigm.

I shall argue that representations of characters, settings, or actions constitute a single, continuous scale with realism at one end of the scale and symbolism at the other. Figurations at the realist end of the scale represent people, objects, and actions as they appear to common observation and as they appear to the represented characters themselves. As Samuel Johnson describes it, discussing the new fiction in the first half of the eighteenth century, realist works “exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind” (18). The definition clearly applies to drama as well as narrative, and it could be applied as well to the objects represented in descriptive poetry. Figurations at the symbolic end of the scale use the dramatic elements to represent or embody the elemental forces and the fundamental structural relations within the author’s own world-picture or cognitive order. Typically symbolic forms of representation include fairy tales, myths, and allegories. For instance, the Greek gods represent forces of nature, elemental human propensities and faculties, and human skills and social activities. The personified forces of nature include the sea and sky, sun and moon, lightning and thunder; elemental human propensities include love, jealousy, wisdom, chastity, libidinousness, and artistic talent; and skills and social activities include medical practice, metal-working, war, commerce, and theft. Allegorical figures in *Pilgrim’s Progress* depict the basic philosophical and moral elements of a Christian world view, situate these elements within a socio-political landscape, and demonstrate the way all these elements interact in a dramatic sequence leading to damnation or salvation. Characters, settings, and events in *The Faerie Queene* represent a commingling of ancient

myths, Christian ethical and philosophical principles, Elizabethan social, economic, and political relations, and like *Pilgrim’s Progress* it locates these relations within the total cosmography of a Christian world view.

The difference between realistic and symbolic forms of representation can be correlated with and, I think, derived from the psychophysiological polarity of extraversion and introversion. This polar concept has been most fully elaborated in the character psychology of Jung, and it has more recently been the subject of intensive empirical research by Hans Eysenck and other psychologists.<sup>3</sup> Put concisely, extraverts are more strongly oriented to absorbing stimuli from the world outside themselves; introverts are more strongly oriented to articulating their own psychic structures. In his essay on Shelley, Robert Browning provides a formulation of this distinction that correlates closely with Johnson’s description of realist fiction. Browning declares that there are two kinds of poets, the objective and the subjective. The “objective poet” seeks “to reproduce things external . . . with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men” (137). In contrast “the subjective poet” is concerned “not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity . . . and he digs where he stands, preferring to seek them in his own soul” (139). Ambrose Bierce offers an incisive formulation of this polarity in respect to the generic distinction between the novel and the romance. “To the romance the novel is what photography is to painting. Its distinguishing principle, probability, corresponds to the literal actuality of the photograph” (314). Leslie Stephen makes a similar distinction in respect to philosophical orientation, and he associates this distinction with the two elementary principles of truth in all representations: coherence and correspondence. “In some minds the desire for unity of system is the more strongly developed; in others the desire for conformity to facts” (I, 6). The subjective orientation is dominated by the desire for coherence or systemic integrity in a theoretical or figurative structure, and the objective orientation is dominated by the desire for a correspondence between that structure and reality. The objective orientation tends to concentrate on depicting the personal experience of other human beings, and the subjective to concentrate on constructing figurations that exemplify the relations among the elemental components of the author’s own cognitive order. Browning’s own dramatic monologues provide a good example of objective or realist representation. Characters such as the speakers in “Porphyria’s Lover,” “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church,” or “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” are not primarily projections of components of Browning’s own psyche; they are not primarily structural elements within his own cognitive map; they are representations of actual or possible

<sup>2</sup>William Cain (31-50) offers a precise analysis of the equivocations that constitute a main component of J. Hillis Miller’s deconstructive critical procedures.

<sup>3</sup>See Eysenck (1967 & 1970-71), Eysenck and Eysenck (1985), Stelmack (1990), Wilson (1993) and Eaves, Eysenck, and Martin (1989).

human beings. In this respect, Browning's poems correspond to the criteria for "formal realism" enunciated by Ian Watt: the representation of "particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places" (31). The primary purpose of Browning's monologues is not to depict the subjective quality of Browning's own experience; it is to depict the subjective quality of the experience of people who are often radically different from Browning himself. In this respect, Browning is more genuinely "Shakespearian" than most lyric poets.<sup>4</sup>

Northrop Frye's effort to distinguish between the novel and the romance can help to clarify the nature of the differences between realistic and symbolic forms of representation. Frye reifies the distinctions, and he situates them within a metaphysical context radically opposed to that of Darwinian naturalism, but on a certain level of description, his characterization can usefully be compared with the concept of a representational continuum. Frye argues that

the novel tends to be extroverted and personal; its chief interest is in human character as it manifests itself in society. The romance tends to be introverted and personal; it also deals with characters, but in a more subjective way . . . . (308)

The romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes. (304)

In contrast to Frye, I would argue that symbolic figures represent not only "psychological archetypes" but also socioeconomic, ideological, religious, and philosophical elements, that is, the relations among *all* the conceptual components of a given world view.

As the quotations from Johnson and Browning suggest, the distinction between realistic and symbolic representation can be associated very closely with a distinction between common understanding and speculative abstraction. It is commonly understood that people occupy a three-dimensional space extending through time, that they undergo the basic biological events of birth and death, and that between these two events they are motivated by certain needs, appetites, or propensities such as hunger, thirst, sexual desire, ambition, fear, curiosity, and affection, that they are vulnerable to injury and sickness, that they are capable of joy and grief, and that they vary a good deal in personality type, in moral character, and in personal development. The common understanding exemplified in realist literature is not "factual" in a way that is qualitatively distinct from observations that would be considered

"theoretical"; it is merely theory at a level of such mundane density of cross-referential verification that the theory requires little conscious construction. In other words, "fact" is itself not qualitatively different from theory; it is merely theory at the level closest to our immediate animal needs. Popper argues that "because all our dispositions are in some sense adjustments to invariant or slowly changing environmental conditions, they can be described as *theory-impregnated* . . . . [T]here is no sense organ in which anticipatory theories are not genetically incorporated" (71-72). The polar terms in propositions of this sort can be turned around: If fact is merely theory at a high level of conviction, theory is merely fact at a level of speculative abstraction remote from the theory already established as fact. Popper argues that "*all science, and all philosophy, are enlightened common sense*" (34). I would myself be less sanguine about the enlightened character of "*all philosophy*." The extension of common sense in philosophy, as in religion, myth, ideology, and "hermetic" sciences like astrology or alchemy, can produce fanciful world views that bear little relation to the actual order of nature. As Leslie Stephen declares, it is perfectly possible for "an erroneous postulate" to survive, so long as it is "not so mischievous as to be fatal to the agent" (I, 4). When regulated by empirically confirmed concepts subject to revision by the criteria of rational judgment, the extension of common sense can also produce valid knowledge. Science is merely that form of speculative abstraction that extends common sense in a series of propositions each of which confirms itself according to the canons of logic and evidence operative also at the lowest level of common sense.

### *Human Nature, Culture and Individual Identity*

In poststructuralist theories of literature, it is a commonplace that, as Wallace Martin declares, "conventional practices do not separate us from reality but create it" (75). In Stanley Fish's more elaborate formulation, "The givens of any field of activity—including the facts it commands, the procedures it trusts in, and the values it expresses and extends—are socially and politically constructed, are fashioned by man rather than delivered by God or Nature" (485). Fish's formulation depends on tacitly suppressing the idea of a reciprocal interaction between nature and culture and presenting these terms as mutually exclusive antitheses. Taken loosely, the commonplace proposition that culture constructs reality is merely a truism: the idea that cultural conventions vary and that these variations influence individual responses to the world. Taken more strictly, the commonplace is a radical absurdity: the idea that "reality" itself exercises no constraining influence on our conception of the world. Even if we reduce "reality" to the world of human thought and behavior, excluding the physical world in which humans live, this

<sup>4</sup>Erich Auerbach identifies the Homeric and Biblical narratives as polar categories. In defining these "basic types," Auerbach integrates Matthew Arnold's dichotomy of Hellenism and Hebraism with a dichotomy of realism and symbolism similar to that outlined here (19). Also see Taine (413-414).

commonplace proposition requires us to suppose that human nature is infinitely malleable and that there are no genetic constraints on behavior, thought, and feeling. In accordance with this supposition, the deep structural similarities across all cultures and between people and other animals would have to be regarded as purely coincidental.<sup>5</sup>

Human ethology—the evolutionary study of human beings—provides us with a perspective that assimilates the half truth in the constructivist commonplace but avoids its absurd implications. Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists take as their central working hypothesis the idea that innate dispositions, the result of an evolutionary process of adaptation, influence every aspect of human identity: cognition, the psychophysiological structure of personality, sexual identity, family functions, the organization of individuals in social structures, and the relation of human beings to the non-human world of physical nature. Some innate dispositions, such as those regulating vital bodily functions like breathing, are “closed” or hard-wired. Other dispositions, including many of those regulating emotional responses and social behavior, are “open” in the sense that they remain latent until elicited by appropriate environmental stimuli. Dispositions that are not closed are susceptible to varying degrees of modification through cultural conditioning, but cultural forms are themselves the product of a complex interaction among various innate dispositions and between innate dispositions and variable environmental conditions.

Allowing, then, both for genetic disposition and for cultural variation, we can formulate the relation between human nature and culture in the following pair of propositions: (1) innate human dispositions exercise a powerful shaping force on all forms of cultural order; (2) all such forces operate in a tight web of systemic interdependency such that the modification of any one element in the system has a distinct effect on all the other elements within the system. Even elemental forces such as the instinct for mother/infant bonding or for procreation can be suppressed within a given cultural complex, as is evidenced by the institutions of the wet nurse and celibate religious societies, but these suppressions carry with them a heavy psychic cost. Most readers would be able to assess personally

<sup>5</sup>For references to prominent formulations from the social sciences proclaiming that human nature is unstructured and almost infinitely plastic, see Tooby and Cosmides (1992) and Degler (1991, 84-104 & 139-166). For a discussion of the quite specific practices that are found in all known human cultures and that thus seem to reflect innate dispositions, see Brown (1991). Brown's work contains a long, annotated bibliography of other efforts to identify human universals. For an exposition of the logic of reproductive success or inclusive fitness as a central principle in the correlation of behavior between humans and other animals, see Trivers (1985). For an application of this logic to moral issues, see Alexander (1987). For an example of a cross-cultural study focussed on a single topic, see Buss (1989). For a comprehensive survey of ethological research that identifies correlations between human and animal behavior and among diverse cultures, see Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989).

and subjectively some of the psychic cost involved in celibacy, and John Bowlby's researches give evidence as to the cost involved in disrupting the mother/infant bond. Our society as a whole is still in the process of conducting experiments in such matters as dissolving the nuclear family and eliminating sex-role distinctions for military combat. The most radically constructivist view of all such changes is that traditional social roles and functions are purely arbitrary and can be altered at will by decrees of social policy. These experiments will be interesting to watch. They will enable us to test the constructivist hypothesis and will provide a good deal of empirical data that can be correlated with evolutionary models of human psychology and social organization.

If innate characteristics form a basis both of individual identity and of cultural order, all three areas necessarily overlap, but they do not merge into identity. Genotypes vary, and while the environmental factors that influence individual identity include larger cultural forces, they also include quite particular circumstances of personal history that vary a great deal within any given cultural order. Individual identity is not identical either with cultural order or with all species-typical characteristics, but both cultural order and human nature can be represented only within the cognitive map of an individual mind. That is, all symbolic representations of human nature and cultural order are necessarily interpretations from the perspective of a distinct individual identity.

Poststructuralist theories of language and culture cannot provide an adequate account of either the realistic and symbolic aspects of figuration or the interactions of innate dispositions, cultural order, and individual identity. By eliminating both the individual identity and innate dispositions as principles of organization, poststructuralism locates all literary relations exclusively on the level of culture. If the world antecedent to culture is itself merely an effect of culture or language, there could be no representation of reality. Symbolic order would have to be all-inclusive, but symbolic structures would not articulate dispositions lodged in individual minds. Individual minds would provide no constraining point of force within a given cultural order. Figuration could thus articulate only its own internal relations. The poet could not hold the mirror up to nature, as Hamlet says he should, for nature would itself merely reflect the properties of mirrors. One such property would be the vivid illusion that people are living organisms within a real, physical universe that exists independently of language.

The strongest general claim that could be made for cultural constructivism would be that culture represents emergent cultural phenomena, that is, phenomena that appear only at the level of organization represented by culture. So far as it goes, this claim is self-evidently true. The specifically constructivist claim, however, is that cultural phenomena possess actual or virtual autonomy and assume independent causal priority over human behavior, thought, and feeling. By having all literary works refer only to other literary

phenomena, or by having all literary figurations wholly constitute their experiences rather than describing them, referring to them, organizing them, expressing them, articulating them, or reconstructing them, poststructuralists render themselves incapable of giving any adequate causal explanation of literary forms. In poststructuralist literary criticism, the skewed causal logic entailed in attributing autonomous causal power to society, culture, or language associates itself intimately with a fundamental falsification of the ontological character of literature. Within the poststructuralist paradigm, the rich world of experience within reality has been emptied out, and in its place we have been given a thin and hectic lay of self-reflexive linguistic functions. This is a dreary, impoverished vision of life and literature, but worse, it is a gratuitous and obviously false vision. It depletes the world, and in order to accomplish its depletion it gives a false account of our experience within the world.

### *The Institutional Situation*

My argument, again, is that the evolutionary explanation of human experience is relatively true. It is not absolutely true, since no knowledge is absolute, but it 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. It thus necessarily provides the basis for any adequate account of culture and of literature. If a theory of culture and literature is true, it can be assimilated to the Darwinian paradigm; and if it cannot be reconciled with the Darwinian paradigm, it is not true. The poststructuralist explanation of things cannot be reconciled with the Darwinian paradigm. It cannot merely be modified and assimilated to the Darwinian paradigm. It is an alternative, competing paradigm. It operates on principles that are wholly different and fundamentally incompatible with those of evolutionary theory.<sup>6</sup> 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.

I am myself under no illusions as to the eagerness with which people will embrace a theoretical proposal that necessarily implies that their own theoretical efforts have been wasted. And even without the self-perpetuating dynamic that is built into any system of vested institutional interests, the kind of paradigm shift I am proposing runs counter to ideological prejudices that are deeply rooted in political commitments, in disciplinary interests, and in metaphysical yearnings. I shall briefly consider each of these three sources of prejudice.

For many people, the idea of biological constraints on human nature seems unacceptable because it supposedly limits the range of possible political reform. The norm that typically governs poststructuralist political thinking is that of anarchistic utopianism. Poststructuralism affiliates itself with every form of radical opposition to prevailing or traditional norms. It affiliates itself with Marxist hostility to bourgeois power structures and to the hegemony of Western culture generally, and it emphatically identifies itself with radical feminism and with militant homosexuality. While I am myself opposed to discrimination and in favor of a large civil tolerance for private behavior, I also have a good deal of respect for normative structures, and I would contend that when one adopts a reflexive, automatic hostility to all normative structures, and then combines this reflexive hostility with a hostility to all "logocentric" or rational modes of thought, the result is merely a perverse negativity. The basic poststructuralist position, inverting Alexander Pope, is that whatever is, is wrong. I would not agree with Pope that whatever is, is right, but I would agree even less with people who are fundamentally opposed to the very principle of normative order.

The radical political motives that animate poststructuralism intertwine themselves inextricably with motives of professional ambition. Biologistic thinking threatens the foundational principles through which both the social sciences and the humanities have sought to establish their disciplinary autonomy.<sup>7</sup> The disciplinary motive in literary criticism can be detected in the otherwise incomprehensible eagerness with which academic critics have embraced Derrida's counter-intuitive assertions that "writing" constitutes an autonomous matrix of reality. If writing, not ripeness, is all, then literary critics have privileged access to ultimate meaning.

<sup>6</sup>For an effort to assimilate evolutionary concepts to a constructivist, consensus-based epistemology, see Rorty (1991, 10) and Herrnstein Smith (1991). In *Natural Classicism*, Frederick Turner goes further than Rorty or Smith in acknowledging the theoretical primacy of modern evolutionary theory, but he nonetheless tries to balance equivocally between the principles of biological causality and those of cultural autonomy (see xiv, xvi, 214, 222). In *A Blessed Rage for Order*, Alexander J. Argyros follows Turner in attempting to acknowledge the influence of evolutionary adaptations while nonetheless "respecting the central importance of culture in determining the world of human beings" (355). Also see Livingston (1988, 134-138). For commentaries emphasizing the biological factors in social relations and literary constructs, see Easterlin (1993), Storey (1993) and Carroll (1994).

<sup>7</sup>On the role of reformist ideology and disciplinary interest in the ideology of the social sciences, see Degler (viii, 82-104, 163, 187-211) and Tooby and Cosmides (34-40). For a critique of sociobiology animated by egalitarian idealism, see *Not in Our Genes* by Lewontin, Rose and Kamin. For an account of the irrational violence with which anthropologists responded to the evidence that in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a founding text of constructivist ideology, Margaret Mead had reached conclusions based on erroneous evidence, see Freeman (1992).

It is hardly surprising that rhetoricians, aggrieved at the continually increasing authority and efficacy of science, would insist that the laws of discourse take precedence over the laws of science. Moreover, if literature refers to the world of experience, and is in this sense primary, then criticism, which refers only to literature, would be "secondary." If, however, literature refers only to a world of words, it is in no way prior to criticism. Thus, twenty years ago, the phrase "secondary literature," meaning critical commentary on literary texts, was standard usage. One now almost never hears the phrase. Poststructuralism, it should be clear, invests rhetoricians with an authority at least equal to that both of scientists and of literary authors.

Finally, these political and disciplinary motives form a natural bond with a quasi-religious desire to preserve an area of human subjectivity or spirituality that is somehow, mystically, distinct from the objective world that can be known by science. The realm of rhetoric is the realm of mystical indeterminacy, and the desire to preserve some such realm from science has dominated critical theory from the time of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. It is a central motive behind Romantic literary theory, phenomenology, Russian formalism, and the more doctrinaire version of New Criticism represented by John Crowe Ransom. The various traditions of transcendental aesthetic theory provide a large context for the poststructuralist hostility to positive scientific understanding.

The three motives I have described—utopian idealism, professionalist ambition, and sublimated religious sentiment—obviously conflict with one another in serious ways, but they all three join forces to obstruct a better motive: the concern for truth. In support of this appeal to truth as a criterion of critical judgment, let me recall the conclusion to Darwin's *Descent of Man*. After acknowledging the distress his theories are likely to produce in many of his readers, Darwin offers consolatory reflections on the nobility displayed in the behavior of certain animals, and he also invokes the hope for still further progress among human beings. Having made these conciliatory points, he returns to his dominant, scientific concern, and he distinguishes unequivocally between his scientific motive and any emotional or ideological motive.

But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it. I have given the evidence to the best of my ability; and we must acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted

powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (2: 405)<sup>8</sup>

The significance of Darwin's concluding observation is only now, over a century later, beginning to be felt in its full force. I predict that within twenty years the Darwinian paradigm will have established itself as the dominant paradigm in the social sciences. It will have done so in spite of all prejudice and all entrenched interests, and it will have done so because of the irresistible force of its explanatory power. I imagine the Darwinian paradigm will take rather longer to establish itself in the humanities and in literary theory, partly because literary theory is heavily dependent on developments in other disciplines, partly because it is far less constrained by empirical findings than the social sciences are, and partly because literary theory is the last refuge of mystical indeterminacy; it is the prime medium for the supposedly transcendent autonomy of the human spirit. But even in literary theory, the need for understanding must ultimately take precedence over beliefs that depend on obscurantism and intellectual obstruction. In any case, whatever happens within the critical institution as a whole, the pursuit of positive knowledge is available to anyone who desires it. Within this pursuit, the opportunities for real and substantial development in our scientific understanding of culture and of literature are now greater than they have ever been before.

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<sup>8</sup>Recent efforts to depict Darwin himself as a proto-deconstructive exemplar of irrationalism and indeterminacy are, I think, fundamentally misconceived. See Beer (1983, 97), Pitts (1990, 82 & 85), Barrish (1991, 431), and Ulin (1992, 303 & 306).



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