



8-23-2017

# Text in the Natural World: Topics of Evolutionary Theory of Literature

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Gregorio, Laurence. *Text in the Natural World: Topics in the Evolutionary Theory of Literature*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2017.

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# Text in the Natural World: Topics of Evolutionary Theory of Literature

## **Description**

The study of literature has expanded to include an evolutionary perspective. Its premise is that the literary text and literature as an overarching institution came into existence as a product of the same evolutionary process that gave rise to the human species. In this view, literature is an evolutionary adaptation that functions as any other adaptation does, as a means of enhancing survivability and also promoting benefits for the individual and society. *Text in the Natural World* is an introduction to the theory and a survey of topics pertinent to the evolutionary view of literature. After a polemical, prefatory chapter and an overview of the pertinent aspects of evolutionary theory itself, the book examines integral building blocks of literature and literary expression as effects of evolutionary development. This includes chapters on moral sense, symbolic thought, literary aesthetics in general, literary ontology, the broad topic of form, function and device in literature, a last theoretical chapter on narrative, and a chapter on literary themes. The concluding chapter builds on the preceding one as an illustration of evolutionary thematic study in practice, in a study of the fauna in the fiction of Maupassant. This text is designed to be of interest to those who read and think about things literary, as well as to those who have interest in the extension of Darwin's great idea across the horizon of human culture. It tries to bridge the gulf that has separated the humanities from the sciences, and would be a helpful text for courses taught in both literary theory and interdisciplinary approaches to literature and philosophy.

## **Keywords**

literature, literary text, evolutionary development, moral sense, symbolic thought, literary aesthetics, literary ontology, literary themes

## **Disciplines**

French and Francophone Literature | Other English Language and Literature | Other French and Francophone Language and Literature

## **Publisher**

Peter Lang

## **ISBN**

9781433137693

## **Comments**

Chapter 1 available by clicking the download link above.

## Chapter I. Polemical Introduction

*Literature is itself an evolved faculty, an adaptation in the evolutionary sense.*

The concept of evolutionary literary study is somewhat new, with early work appearing only late in the last century. A comprehensive poetics based on evolutionary thought has yet to be written. This book represents only one step in that direction as a survey of topics pertinent to an ontology of some of literature's most basic building blocks, topics that focus attention on the literary text as a product of evolutionary processes. Text as adaptation. Building blocks of literary text as by-products of evolution. Humankind grasping the pen with its apposable thumb and writing in the ink of its own evolutionary past.

An introduction to an evolutionary study of literary theory today might well be polemical. The first reason for this is that the topic of evolution has been a lightning rod for indignation from all sides since well before Darwin's time—Darwin, of course, not standing in history as the first to suggest the notion of evolution itself, but rather as the one who proposed a viable theory to explain it. The appearance of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 was greeted with immediate controversy in all quarters, scientific as well as cultural, but the notion of the transmutation and inter-relatedness of species prior to Darwin, from Buffon and Lamarck up to Darwin's own grandfather Erasmus, generated good measures of consternation in and beyond science. The implications of such a notion were immediately evident, and philosophy, theology and social thought wasted no time in decrying those implications. It was not for nothing that Cuvier's reactive response to early evolutionary thought was impassioned, for it was clear from the start that this concept was an idea fraught with danger for the fixity of the "Great Chain of Being," the

vertical moral gradient of existence which held sway from Aristotle's *scala naturae* through the Enlightenment and beyond. In a sense, it would be natural both for Church and for humanists to reject evolution out of hand, for its first suggestion concerning humanity would be to drop it a few pegs to a community with the "lower" forms of life—hardly a worthy status for the conveyor of either an immortal soul or an enlightened mind. Not for the last time, by any means, do both sides of a spectrum line up in resistance to this idea of evolution whose evidence is nonetheless compelling.

Among philosophers and scientists the battle has been won, but there is still need to make the case in the broader arena of society and culture. Scholars in literature, moreover, do not appear convinced that evolutionary theory has light to shine on the bases of literary study. For one thing, past abuses certainly invite skepticism today, as evolutionary thought has (quite wrongly) been twisted to purport some assumed natural supremacy of one sex over the other, one economic ideology over the other, one ethnic group over the other. Wariness born of such misuse poses an understandable obstacle to broader acceptance in scholarship.

An introduction to an evolutionary theory of literature might today also be political, and hence polemical. Evolution as a matter of science remains a theory of controversy everywhere but in science. It is, to put it mildly, a hot-button issue in the arena of cultural—and therefore, political—debate today no less than in the days following the publication of Darwin's *Origin*. So not only in the politics of scholarship, but also in the politics of the broader arena of culture might an argument ensue upon the very introduction of the concept of evolution into any theoretical framework—outside of science, that is. I expect that the same hostility will greet the theory of an evolutionary view of the building blocks of literature. Resistance may be motivated by the novelty of the ontological approach or by concerns over past misapplications of

Darwinian thought in socio-politics and economics. Let us at least try to overcome it in a collegial spirit.

Darwin himself referred to his manifesto, the *Origin*, as “one long argument.” We who recognize the universality of what Daniel Dennett called “Darwin’s dangerous idea” for human affairs should pick up the polemic. But it is not for Darwin’s sake that we bring the concept to literary study, for it was the same Darwin who wrote in a letter at one point, “I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me.” His theory and his argumentative approach we shall sustain; his personal aesthetic inclinations we shall, I think, leave aside with not a little embarrassment. Evolutionary thought since Darwin has expanded, enabling the “dangerous idea” to shed its light on most areas of intellectual endeavor including literary aesthetics, as we shall see.

Endeavoring to craft an evolutionary understanding of literary aesthetics without engaging in political debate is, at best, naïve, and at worst, disingenuous. There is no reason to hide from the facts of life, at least those that obtain at the time of this writing. And the facts are such that an evolutionary framework of thought will generate resistance and resentment in several places only on account of the strings that have been attached to evolution outside of science. The ethical fallout and caveats from the legacy of a misguided experiment in social engineering that was “Social Darwinism,” I can accept with humility and carefulness, attentive to the fact that evolutionary thought did indeed acquire that ugly baggage in the past. The ideological debate born of the good-faith interpretation of evolutionary thought as positing sexism or classism, I engage with respect, confident that the evolutionary model can be put forward without those implications, and that they are not necessary conclusions of evolutionary thought anyway. But the purely political noise that trumpets forth like a fire siren at the mention

of Darwin's name or thought, the reactionary and thoughtless alarmism dictated by one politico-religious platform, I will not waste time or effort on: bereft as it is of intellectual integrity, it cannot by its nature yield as any argument should to an ideological *force majeure*—which I believe evolutionary thought to be; at the outset of a fruitless discussion, I would know that I argue in good faith while the other side would seek only to proselytize. That kind of futility is out of place in true scholarship.

The tone of the discussion about evolutionary theory is often shrill. Rhetoric can be charged, whether by adherence to a particular version of religious orthodoxy, or by displaced or projected political confrontation, or even by sensitivity to academic turf. Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, early explorer on the landscape of sociobiology, got a pitcher of water poured over his head at a conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, evidently by protesters troubled with the implications of extending evolutionary theory to the interpretation of human social behavior. No doubt there are those who will see in any attempt to bring evolutionary theory to the philosophy of aesthetics an effort to sneak eugenics, Social Darwinism or genetic determinism in by the back door.

I speak only for myself when I offer the reader my assurance that evolutionary theory is not organically linked to such stuff. Sir Francis Galton or Andrew Carnegie would certainly disagree, but for my part, nothing is more abhorrent than the use of scholarship either to devalue persons or to validate an exploitative socio-economic status quo. That is precisely what eugenics and Social Darwinism tried to do, regardless of either the guises in which they appeared or the good intentions with which they professed to pave their roads. My intentions in detailing an evolutionary view on the components of literature could not be further removed from moralizing or prescribing a socio-economic order. No doubt the objection will be raised that such a thing as

an ontology of literature cannot be tendered without moral, political, social and economic implications. Perhaps it will even be argued that either philosophy or aesthetics must be furthering a political agenda of some sort. I say, let the ideological heirs of Galton and Carnegie write their own poetics, for they will find no sustenance in these pages. Simply put, this view of literature will not include the morally evaluative; genetic determinism may well be a thematic motif of the nineteenth-century Naturalists, but it is no more integral to a general philosophy of literature than any other literary motif, white whales and melancholy Danes notwithstanding.

So if an evolutionary take on literature proposes not to serve an economic agenda, what then does it purport to do? It is intended to situate aesthetics in general, and literature in particular, in the history of the psychic faculty of the human species. It is intended to analyze and explain what it is that literature-as-psychic-activity does, and do so in light of the evolution of the mind. Likewise it is intended to be an ontology of the literary function in the human mind, but one which is premised on the postulate that the literary function is an evolved mechanism, selected (in the Darwinian sense of the term) for its contribution to the survivability of the individual.

*At the outset, let us understand the following as a definition of the term "literature" as used here: it is writing (but does not exclude oral tradition), distinguished from the non-literary uses of writing in an aesthetic sense, in that it is **predominantly** fictional or lyrical, text which is for the greater part, if not exclusively, imaginative.*

Philosophy has long grappled with understanding the nature of fictional literature. Aristotle's *Poetics* takes a basically affective approach to a very circumscribed statement of the issue. Subsequent efforts to describe the phenomenon of the literary have, for the most part, concentrated on inherent characteristics of the text and, in more recent cases, on the psychic

properties pertinent to the literary experience in the dynamic's players. Since the time that structuralism turned its attention to the matter of literary ontology, special attention has been paid to the dynamics of language and the generation of meaning as they pertain to the workings of the literary text.

Evolutionary theory of literature shifts the focus somewhat, away from the strictly linguistic faculties of the mind, to the slightly more general faculties of symbolic thought and moral consciousness, and beyond to considerations of survival strategy, culture and posterity awareness, kinship as it pertains to the dynamics of textual communication, and so on—characteristics all either inherent to the text itself or pertinent to the communicative circuit of the fictional text, which is to say, ontological traits by all means neither unfamiliar to the philosophy of the literary nor so far removed from it as to seem foreign to the ken of poetics.

All this is by way of saying to the reader, do not be put off by what may be anticipated as the scientific side of evolutionary literary theory. It will, I trust, prove more accessible than the linguistics of structuralist theory, the philosophy of deconstruction theory, or the economics of the Marxist model.

So why an *evolutionary* model for an ontology of literature? What is the logical impetus, the compelling call that gives sense to a philosophy of the literary faculty and aesthetic that is premised on the theory of evolution? Might the choice of evolutionary theory be an arbitrary one, or is there something in the nature of literature that betokens its origins and its development within the process that gave rise to human evolution? It is an implicit thesis of this work that the latter is the case, and that there is great explanatory sense to be made in defining an ontology of literature in reference to the deep history of the species that brought it forth. If the deep structure of language and the dynamics of signification were so integral to the phenomenon of literature to

warrant basing ontologies of literature on them, then the same can be said of the evolution of moral consciousness and aesthetic sense. For our purposes, evolution is understood as the process—the ongoing process—which brought about everything that makes humankind human. If only to appeal to the last half-century of scholarship in literary studies for support of this endeavor, it must be pointed out that nothing more certainly underlies language and meaning in the psyche than the very development of symbolic thought, moral consciousness, and the psyche itself: if linguistics and the deconstruction of meaning have deserved to serve as models for entire philosophies of literature, then surely evolutionary theory does as well. While it is true that evolutionary science has not yet pinpointed the actual origins of *Homo sapiens* on the Darwinian tree of life (and perhaps may never), the fact that the evidence of evolution may clearly be traced, and the fact that evolutionary process may be studied in the present with clarity and certainty, lead us to conclude that evolutionary theory may shed considerable light on the literary faculty which has nourished the human mind since time immemorial. To study the circumstances that gave rise to the development of moral consciousness, kinship awareness, and metaphor in thought and communication, for example, will be to study the very substance of what we call literature. To phrase the mission of an evolutionary explanation of literature most concisely, it is to describe the ways in which literature is a response to environmental facts and evolutionary pressures.

Now, to extrapolate metaphysics from science and theory in the physical realm may cause an objection to rise; however, if the extrapolation is logical and plausible, the reader may conclude that the endeavor is worthwhile; if the reader is versed in the ethereal postmodernism which has held sway in literary theory for more than a generation, an evolutionary poetics would perhaps have the virtue of being down to earth and even compelling for its historical clarity.

Daniel Dennett coined the phrase “universal acid” in referring to the great idea of evolution, proposing to see in the theory a relevance that would burn its way into any and every area of intellectual work. Darwin’s notebooks and correspondence lead us to believe that the concept of evolution by natural selection, or “descent with modification” as he preferred to say, occurred to him progressively but ineluctably. Since 1859 when Darwin first published his theory and quickly convinced scientists of its validity, it has made its path across the liberal arts: philosophy, sociology, religion, psychology, politics, the fine arts, economics, anthropology, geology and all sciences related to biology have felt the impact of this great idea. It stands to reason that literature, as an institution of artifact and a product of culture in all reaches of the world, is likely to show in some measure the traces of human evolution in its long history; literature being as well a semantic phenomenon, it is also likely that its thematics will have to do with the facts of life as evolution has shaped them.

Of course, “ownership” of evolutionary theory becomes a matter for discussion, as can be expected whenever two or three meet in the name of scholarship. It has been my experience that the least resistance comes from biologists themselves, those for whose field evolution serves as the unifying principle; I have found colleagues in that field most often helpful and also curious to see where evolutionary theory is leading others along the landscape of the liberal arts. But there are those who would see evolutionary theory circumscribed in its application outside the sciences. John Dupré, for example, goes to some effort arguing that the theory does not well apply to the study of culture and especially psychology; perhaps that as a student of *philosophy*, he doth protest a tad too much. Still his point is well taken that both human evolutionary history and human development are sufficiently complex to dissuade us from drawing pat conclusions for our culture and psychology today based on inferences about Stone Age humans.<sup>1</sup> An

evolutionary theory of literature should endeavor to avoid such a pitfall, and it should suffice to keep before us the postulate that literature may be studied as a reflection of the timeless evolutionary process—principles that are now, as much as they have always been, in effect. We shall not be attempting to identify some “literary gene” or even suggest the existence of such a thing. The level at which we apply evolutionary theory is not the genetic level at which evolution itself functions on organisms, populations and species. Rather it is in both considering the literary faculty as a by-product of the evolutionary process, and in suggesting that literary production is an adapted behavioral strategy that enhances human survival, that we proceed.

Then there is the ever-present, ever-looming issue of the political ramifications of evolution. Not to be parochial I hasten to add that, to the great credit of other nations and communities of scholarship, this is an issue of controversy only in the U.S. for the most part. Nonetheless, writers from Stephen Jay Gould to Edward Humes (*Monkey Girl*) have been sensitive to the long political history of reaction to Darwinian thought. On the one hand, the politico-religious right in the U.S. has, since the time of William Jennings Bryan, coalesced around a consciously non-rational opposition to evolutionary theory. Now, on the other hand and in recognition of the simple and ineluctable reality of evolution, there appears to be a movement afoot on the political right to appropriate evolutionary theory to any degree possible; hence the appearance of *Darwinian Conservatism* by Larry Arnhart, and of *Evolution and Ethics: Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective* (the proceedings of a conference at Calvin College, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, and published by W.B. Eerdmans—college and publisher both self-identifying as biblically-based Christian, Templeton Foundation claiming religious neutrality but touting “core themes” such as prayer, entrepreneurship, meditation, concepts of God, and awarding a large annual prize for

“discoveries about spiritual realities;” the Templeton Foundation was a financial supporter of a conference of the anti-evolutionary Discovery Institute [see J. Wilgoren]).

Far be it from me to foreclose the application of Darwinian theory in any quarter. The point is that it is indeed proving to be a “universal acid,” and its pertinence is becoming clear to many areas of scholarly enterprise. Those who find relevance to their religion in evolutionary thought are to be commended for expansion of the philosophical horizon; those who would try to co-opt evolution to serve religious ends might end up distorting it, but I will leave that to more competent philosophers of science to deal with. It is those, however, who confront evolutionary thought with ignorance and fear inherited through generations of reactionary indignation, the descendants of William Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday, that I find contemptible. Intellectual argument in good faith is always of value. But today’s creationists and purveyors of what they term Intelligent Design do not deal in anything resembling good faith. It is nothing other than intellectual fraud to proceed from an assumed conclusion (here, that the Bible is an inerrant source of scientific information, and hence that evolution will necessarily prove to be an illusion), and then to pretend to be debating science or philosophy in order necessarily to arrive at the preordained conclusion: such nonsense is reprehensible since it makes a mockery of the pursuit of knowledge and makes of science a patsy for one narrow religious outlook among many possible. The undeniable protocol is to arrive at any cost at the ratification of fundamentalist religion instead of following facts where they lead; and creationists have yet to admit this glaring fact about themselves, obviously absolving themselves of this deception with a smug “God wills it.” That is bad enough, but there is much worse. The tack that today’s creationist faction has conspired to take is first to wed their prejudice to an extremist wing of a political party, then to use their enormous monetary endowment to displace the issue from the

classroom and laboratory, to that tawdry forum of publicity “spin” and talk radio, there to conduct a willful campaign of misinformation, smoke screening and rear-guard sniping, saying no-matter-what in service to their agenda and damning the torpedoes of fact. It suffices to create the impression of a controversy. Convincing many in an unsuspecting public that a controversy of science is raging when there is no such thing, they have the effrontery to impugn the integrity of virtually all scientists. And all this is done with the arrogance of self-righteousness born of zealotry, in gleeful spite of knowledge and reason. This variety of fraud deserves no place at the table where science and philosophy are discussed. The sooner it is consigned to what Christopher Hitchens dubs “a footnote in the history of piffle,” the better.<sup>2</sup>

Science has never made a secret of the possible means of Darwin’s undoing. If it did, it wouldn’t be science. Would that creationism were so intellectually honest. But if there were found to be one solitary (but genuine) fossil discovery where a dinosaur lay atop some large mammal, Darwin would vanish. Such a discovery certainly will not be made, given all that science has learned, but in principle it could, and hence evolutionary theory is falsifiable. It’s just that it *hasn’t* been falsified, all of creationism’s histrionics notwithstanding. Creationist “museums” exhibit elaborate animated displays of dinosaurs and humans living side by side: surely if such had been the case, with all the dinosaur fossils unearthed the world over, there would have *somewhere* been discovered human remains nearby or in the same geological stratum; but never, not once, has that happened.

Actually, creationists had their golden chance (straw man, though it turns out to have been, and predictably so) after the emergence of molecular biology and the discovery of the genome. As it happens, if it were only demonstrable that chimps are genetically more closely related to, say, dandelions (or even dogs) than to humans or gorillas, then the entire edifice of

evolutionary theory would collapse. Any such event across the enormous tree of life would have sufficed to give the victory to the creationists as a reward for a century and a half of groundless bickering. And yet, genetics validated evolutionary theory right down the line as scientists knew it would—despite the fact that Darwin built his theory painfully aware that the mechanism of biological inheritance remained, for him in his day, an important and embarrassing gap, and went to his grave ignorant of the existence and the function of genes. The chance was always there that genetics would eventually come along and disprove Darwin utterly. It just didn't, and creationists have not yet summoned the honesty or the decency to admit the fact. The very same principles of genetic relatedness that stand up in a court of law today to establish truth (“forensically,” as it is termed) beyond a shadow of a doubt, are the principles that establish relatedness of *species*; if you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is easy to imagine a creationist on the horns of a dilemma of his own choosing: whether to allow DNA evidence to prove himself innocent of a crime, or to stick by his guns, send himself to the slammer and that old devil Darwin to hell.

A well-worn line of pseudo-argument says, “evolution is only a theory, so that means it is not fact.” To which the reply, a theory is a heuristic device, a reasoned, logically deduced model for interpreting facts that, where evolution is concerned, are as real and verifiable as they can possibly be. A theory is an explanation that puts order to facts and makes sense out of them, and most importantly, it can at any time be proven wrong. If it is proven wrong, it is jettisoned. If it continues to be validated, it has merit. Evolution as a theory is as tested as any theory in science. It continues to stand, and for this it is as factual as any interpretive model in currency. Yet against this backdrop, creationists persist in niggling with a handful of the same weary, trivial objections that long, long ago have been discounted by science. All they would have to do to

win their *jihad* against science is to adduce actual evidence: as argued above, were they to show one—just one—undisturbed site where dinosaur remains are atop those of a cow, the day would be theirs. If they could somehow devise one experiment to prove the negative that is Intelligent Design (i.e. “‘irreducible complexity’ *cannot* have arisen otherwise”), they might garner the first bit of credibility. Instead and in the meantime, they have nothing, not a single shred of evidence to support their bluster. In a word, their obstructionist campaign is an insult to serious thought, so it will have no place in the present work. It simply doesn’t deserve it. As to the word game of “only a theory,” I submit that gravity, too, is “only a theory” and anyone who defiantly doubts that theory might show the courage of his convictions by taking a stroll out a second-story window.

Our interest here will point to an evolutionary theory of literature—a *theory* in the genuine sense of the word. It will be a hypothetical model of thought based on a correlation between the evolved human mind and the literary endeavor which that mind has undertaken through the ages, a hypothesis which will be constructed from information gathered in the facts of evolution as the applied study of evolution has adduced them. Such a hypothesis should fear nothing from the touchstones of reasonable skepticism and evolutionary science (insofar as the latter can bear upon philosophy). And it should always be present in our minds that a hypothesis in the application of evolutionary thought to a philosophy of literature will even have the advantage of empirical testing: thanks to the pioneering data analysis of Joseph Carroll et al. (*Graphing Jane Austen*), we may look forward to going beyond the realm of the thought

experiment. At times, the theory will indeed cross the line of pure speculation with inferences about evolutionary origins; in these circumstances we will not presume to speak with authority on origins, and the point will always be to relate the faculty of literary appreciation to the evolved mind as we at least now know it to have developed. On the safe assumption that the human mind is an adapted resource, and with the knowledge of evolutionary facts of life as an historical basis, we will look towards the project of outlining an abstract model of the literary enterprise in general.

But as to the utility of an evolutionary theory of literature, what is likely to come forth from such a project to shed new light on an old topic? Philosophers from Aristotle to Sartre have delved into the nature of literature, and schools of criticism have multiplied the angles from which to define it. The easy answer is to say that evolutionary thought is simply a new angle to take. I am not persuaded that all previous attempts have been overly fruitful; in particular, the postmodern model that has held sway for a generation has not explained a lot cogently, and it has succeeded in digging a chasm between literary studies and the rest of the liberal arts, as well as in projecting the image of a gratuitous esotericism. Never was Montaigne's question in his essay "De l'experience" more pertinent: "Le principal et le plus fameux sçavoir de nos siecles, est-ce pas sçavoir entendre les sçavants?" ["Is not the main and most highly reputed learning, in our times, learning how to understand the learned?"].

Postmodernism asserts that science, like any area of intellectual pursuit, is a social construct and hence devoid of objective truth and not privileged as fact. I anticipate that an evolutionary basis for literary theory will be greeted with that charge. Michael Ruse tenders a pertinent response:

But, for the Darwinian epistemologist, the epistemic values themselves are not reflections of some absolute reality—forms in a Platonic heaven or whatever. Rather, they have the pragmatic origin of having proven themselves in the struggle for existence and having thus been selected to inform and structure our thinking. The foundations of science, therefore, are a subtle blend of the biological and the cultural—epistemic and metaphorical coming together to make one whole.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Carroll in *Evolution and Literary Theory* addresses shortcomings of poststructuralism in a lengthy bill of particulars (the first chapter of his book) to which I refer the reader. But to phrase the question positively, can an evolutionary perspective bring new and useful understanding to literary ontology, which archetypal, New Criticism, formalist and structuralist, psychoanalytic, *sociocritique*, postmodern and other schools have not brought?

The most evident and accessible application of evolutionary thought involves the components of the literary text and discourse: the identification of motifs (“the hostile environment,” for example, or the erotic appetite) that in their thematic content have correlatives in evolution, and the study of the relationship between human evolution and the figures and structural building blocks of literature (symbolic thought as an evolved device, for example). But beyond these more expectable topics, what has yet to be described is the relationship between humanity and its literature in the context of the former’s struggle for survival. We may investigate what humanity accomplishes with its literary expression, developed over time as a common practice and drawing on an evolved faculty of the mind, aside from what aesthetics and philosophy have already identified. *In as concise a statement as possible, the thesis may be put*

*forward that literature is itself an evolved faculty, an adaptation in the evolutionary sense, a strategy developed—not itself in the genes, but in the (collective) psyche those genes have produced—to enhance survival and accomplish ends important to humanity for a spectrum of reasons, from the essential and useful to the culturally enriching.* To pursue this avenue of inquiry is to craft a theory of literature based on evolution understood as a historical reality.

Where Aristotle sees mimesis and catharsis as driving forces in literature, where structuralism sees linguistics and semiotics sees sign dynamics, where *sociocritique* sees social context and Marxist criticism sees dialectical materialism, this inquiry proposes to study evolution as the engine of the literary enterprise. But it is not so much the evolution *of* literature or the evolution *in* literature (in the form of motif) that is in question; instead, it is a perspective on the essence of literature and the literary enterprise, an ontology of literature, that views this uniquely human enterprise of imagining and writing and reading as a product of the evolutionary process, a behavior upon which the species has hit as a successful means of enhancing survival. The thesis is that literature is a behavioral kind of adaptation, doing what adaptations do in the rest of evolutionary experience, enhancing survivability and altering the circumstances of life for the better.

Finally, a word here about instinct and heritability. It is called for by the stated thesis of this work. In the tradition of Darwin himself, who conscientiously looked forward to the likely objections that both other naturalists and his detractors would raise, and answered them in a collegial and constructive manner, I would like to address the topic of genetic coding and the behavior to which it gives rise. I anticipate that, first, the link between genes and the literary function of the human mind will be perceived as the most vulnerable, if not tenuous, part of the

study here proposed, and second, that the link will be seen as a leap of faith made without regard for the science involved.

In the interest of full disclosure, I say openly that I am not a biologist; my field is the study of fictional literature and literary theory. So it is a fair question to ask how I can rightly theorize about instinctual behavior and the proposition that it is genetically passed from generation to generation. Given the thesis I will be advancing, namely that the human capacity for making and appreciating literature is an evolved adaptation, it would be vital to be on solid ground where the science is concerned.

First and foremost, my postulates about heredity are categorically *not* Lamarckian. That is to say that my understanding of the literary faculty is *not* that it is some kind of once-learned information that is somehow translated into genetic bases and read like an instruction manual by subsequent generations of literati (or by their DNA, or by anything else). Instead, my premise is that there can be proposed a heritable faculty, selected for by virtue of the advantages it confers, and that I should make the case for it. I would ask the reader to judge the relative merits of that endeavor.

To elaborate most briefly on my premises: animal behavior biologists and geneticists speak of "thresholds," traits that are inherited in DNA and have evolved to be more or less sensitive to certain stimuli for reasons of evolutionary advantage. These traits are not the results of translated information about how to behave; instead they include inherited affinities that program them to behave in certain ways based on stimuli received. Science now best understands instinct as a highly complex interplay between genetically programmed predisposition to behavior, and environmental stimulus. In proposing that the human faculty for the literary is of such a stripe, I hope to have allayed fears that this study will be a long "Just So"

story. In formulating this take on an evolutionary theory of literature, I look to Darwin, Dawkins and a host of researchers and writers in science, including Mendel and Jung, as guides. Kipling doesn't make the cut.

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<sup>1</sup> Dupré, 80–92.

<sup>2</sup> Hitchens, 249.

<sup>3</sup> Ruse, 244.