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Plotting Devices: History and Form in Evolutionary Literary Criticism

Evolutionary literary theory has recently emerged as a scientific field of inquiry into fiction. (The field goes by many names: literary Darwinism, evocriticism, etc., but I'll stick with evolutionary literary theory.) The *New York Times* has dubbed it the "Next Big Thing" in English Departments, and, in addition to the dozen-or-so books appearing over the last ten years, the field now has its own professional journal, the *Evolutionary Review*. The leaders of the movement are Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall, co-editors of the newly released *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader*, published by Columbia University Press.

The evolutionary literary theorists have a focused set of concerns and a clear agenda, both professionally and politically. The movement owes its origins largely to the "science wars" or "culture wars" of the 1990s. Carroll, Boyd, and others were disgusted by the prevalence of postmodern ideas that challenged the validity of modern science. More specifically, evolutionary literary theorists believe that biology and psychology can grant us knowledge of a universal "human nature," and they claim that the foundations of such knowledge have already been laid—particularly by E. O. Wilson's program of sociobiology and John Tooby and Leda Cosmides's more recent program of evolutionary psychology. A small but vocal minority of literature professors have thus banded together to form a "science and literature" research project that rejects both the work dominant in English Departments for the past thirty years and favors a more "scientific" approach to literary study (with quantifiable analyses, data charts, falsifiable theories, etc.). Politically, the leaders of this new field have tended to align on the right, and have been critical of the dominance of a more liberal, social attitude in literary criticism.

The movement began with polemical attacks against the widespread approval of Marx and Freud, whose ideas have remained far more current in the humanities than in the sciences. In a very basic sense, as Gottschall pointed out in a 2003 article, evolutionary literary theory seeks to replace literary criticism based on Freudian psychoanalytic principles with criticism based on more the more scientifically acceptable theories of evolutionary psychology. For those who feel that literature departments have become too dependent on recognizably outdated and falsified theories from the social sciences, evolutionary literary theory may seem to offer a fresh sense of theoretical progress.

However, while the call for greater “consilience” with the natural sciences (and even the rejection of a Marxist political agenda) may be attractive to many scholars, potential adherents could be discouraged by the radically new professional aims of evolutionary literary theory. Boyd, Carroll, and Gottschall are primarily concerned with narrative (rather than poetry), leading to a focus in the novel. Carroll has explained that the elements of interest for evolutionary literary study are characters, plots, and settings—a view reinforced by Boyd, who seeks to isolate “story” from any overall text. (Thus Boyd, in his book *On the Origin of Stories*, published last year by Harvard University Press, is equally comfortable working the *Odyssey* and Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who!*, since, regardless of form, they each tell a story.) The major advantage is that a focus on story rather than style (or language) allows for a more global scope and an appreciation of “world literature.” (Just as human nature is universal, so are aspects of human stories.)

The focus on storytelling leads to some new interesting questions: Why do we like stories? What use do they have? Why are some kinds of stories more popular than others? But in seeking answers for these questions, the evolutionary literary theorists—with their emphasis in

evolutionary psychology—have made human nature, rather than literary texts themselves, their subject. The result can feel bizarre; for example, Boyd's claim that Joyce's *Ulysses* is a reiteration of Homer's popular story seems to miss the point. History and language (or style, form) have been tremendously important to professional literary study over the past hundred years, and the evolutionary critics give them short shrift. Human nature, they argue, has changed little in the past ten thousand years. Historical (and cultural) changes are not nearly important as the shared, universal traits of human nature—like aggression, mating strategies, and social behavior—traits that can be revealed by psychological readings of popular stories.

The neglect of human history is an extreme step for literary professionals. (In many ways, the humanities have distinguished themselves from the sciences by paying attention to the particular rather than the general and by retaining a sense of academic tradition rather than relying only on current theories.) The evolutionary literary critics' rejection of history is so extreme that it fails to find support even from the scientists who provide the foundation for the movement. Both E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins (often cited by the new critics) have advocated the documentation of small, rapid changes in cultural developments in addition to the genetic and even behavioral elements of universal human nature. Yet the evolutionary literary critics have largely ignored this avenue of research.

This line of cultural-historical inquiry commonly centers on the "meme," a word coined by Dawkins. A meme refers to a fundamental unit of culture (a unit analogous to a gene), which spreads through a population and gets passed on through time. (Examples include melodies, clothing styles, and theological beliefs.) Wilson also came up with a term for a similar element: the "cultorgen," which is like a meme, only, rather than referring to the cultural element itself, the term "cultorgen" signifies the neural pattern that indicates the phenomenon in the mind.

The main problem with the meme, or cultural unit, is the difficulty of establishing its existence “in nature.” Carroll and Boyd both dismiss the meme as a troublesome metaphor. (Wilson’s solution was to declare that the culturgen was actually a replicable neurological pattern in the brain and not an ideal form of artifact.) Yet the concept of a meme is incredibly useful for thinking about short-term evolutionary change in cultural history—useful in the sense that the meme moves beyond individual artists and works to identify trends, patterns, and—most importantly—developments.

While Dawkins generated a fair deal of controversy and attention with memetics, the concept of an evolutionary cultural unit is certainly not a recent one. Arthur Lovejoy, for example, almost a hundred years ago, began encouraging scholars to consider the “history of ideas,” claiming that the persistence of certain “unit-ideas” ensured that philosophical systems were better studied as new patterns of basic components rather than original ideas in themselves. Furthermore, Lovejoy, like the evolutionary literary critics, believed that literature could be studied as a causal process that is global and universal in scope: “As soon as the historical study of literature is conceived as a thorough investigation of any causal process—even the comparatively trivial one of the migration of stories—it must inevitably disregard national and linguistic boundary lines” (Lovejoy 18).

One of the most recent literary scholars to stress the idea of the cultural unit is Franco Moretti. Moretti has lately embraced a Darwinian outlook on literature, claiming that evolutionary “trees” can be used to trace phenomena like the development of the detective novel. And, like the literary Darwinists, Moretti not only appeals to an evolutionary explanatory system, but he also urges scholars in literature departments to adopt a more scientific method, arguing

that professional work should include collecting quantifiable data, proposing falsifiable theories, and testing those theories experimentally.

Moretti emphasizes literary scholarship that focuses on genres and devices rather than the study of single authors and close readings of individual works. Genres can include “detective fiction” or “the bildungsroman,” and a device could be something like free indirect discourse. By focusing on genres and devices, Moretti can do “distant readings” that span across the literature of multiple nations and eras. He points out that story or plot (being largely independent from language) tends to travel across contexts very well, but style is much more bound by language and culture. So mapping changes and developments in style requires greater attention to cultural history.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that Carroll, Boyd, and other evolutionary literary critics have not embraced Moretti’s work. In fact, neither Carroll nor Boyd has referenced his work at all. The political aims of the evolutionary literary critics are decidedly anti-Marxist, and Moretti’s academic development falls along Marxist lines. But these two Darwinian approaches to literary study are compatible. While literature, conceived of as human artifact, is certainly tied to an understanding of human nature, it is also profitable to view literature itself as an entity with its own history and evolution. Moretti’s approach allows us to appreciate the subtle differences and changes literature undergoes in its own development, differences and changes too small to be attributable to genetic changes in human nature itself.

Moretti is not a “traditional” scholar, but he has been deeply concerned with both history and form. In fact, his model is an attempt to combine both historicism and formalism (by tracing genres and devices historically). He does so by claiming for literary research a more scientific aspect, which must certainly be attractive to the evolutionary literary critics. If Moretti’s work

can be reconciled with theirs, then we can understand evolutionary literary theory as a new *direction* for literary research rather than a gestalt change within the profession. I believe that a greater emphasis on Moretti's aims can still satisfy most of the aims of the evolutionary literary critics (the need for theories, data, falsification, comparisons across world literature, etc.).

As I said, I believe Moretti's outlook—a focus on literary units like genres and devices—to be compatible with—and complementary to—the work currently being produced by evolutionary literary theory. I think that such a combination could make a more scientific approach to literary study more attractive to more scholars.

Now I'd like to illustrate what Moretti's approach can add by looking at a few recently proposed models for an understanding of the literary stylistic phenomenon known as free indirect discourse.

Joseph Carroll and Brian Boyd don't focus much on style, and reference to free indirect discourse in their works is fleeting. This is all the more surprising given that they devote so much attention to the novels of Jane Austen, arguably the first Western author to really develop this stylistic device. (Carroll and Boyd's interest is in courtship rather than style in Austen's work.) So in an essay on Austen, Boyd devotes one paragraph to free indirect discourse, explaining that Austen was the first to use the device, which, he says, functions as part of a "cheater detection" system: characters in her novels (like human beings everywhere) need to closely observe and monitor both themselves and others in order to be able to predict future

actions and prepare for future situations. Free indirect discourse, for Boyd, is a kind of mindreading that gets to the heart of the observational behavior of evolved human sociality.

Blakey Vermeule, Moretti's colleague at Stanford, offers a promising account of free indirect discourse in her new book *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, a book which links the dissemination of literature to socially evolved forms of gossip. Now, she claims that free indirect discourse works like a meme, and she even references the work of Moretti, but then she slips into the mire of human nature. Vermeule can't seem to decide whether or not to address the historical development of free indirect discourse. She begins with the technique in Chaucer's work, then acknowledges its appearance in works of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, seemingly proposing that it's a universal element. But then she claims that Jane Austen more or less created the technique and that Henry James perfected it, thus characterizing free indirect discourse as a nineteenth-century phenomenon. She's basically interested in the idea of authors representing "mind-reading" (like Boyd) but she offers no reason why free indirect discourse develops in the odd way that it did. We're left to suppose that it just appeared for no reason, like a mutation, and then became just part of the novelistic mode because it works so well with the human psyche.

Vermeule's analysis also ends up being shallow because she wants to explain free indirect discourse as a unitary and universal phenomenon. She explains that it's "a technique for presenting a character's thoughts from a third-person point of view," which is not completely accurate; that's also what regular indirect discourse does (75). Using Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as her primary example, she describes free indirect discourse as "a vehicle for bearing an emotional tone . . . a tone of egotistical self-assertion" (78). She claims that it's a subtle way to register petty complaints. But this is a very idiosyncratic view of the technique—one that applies

well to *Madame Bovary*, but not as well to *A Sentimental Education*, or García Márquez's *The General in His Labyrinth*.

Moretti actually echoes Vermeule's idea about gossip/socialization (albeit in a Marxist way). Also examining the work of Austen and Flaubert, he claims that free indirect discourse is a turn away from the didactic tone and that it allows for the appearance of a third voice (between narrator and character), the voice of the "well-socialized individual," or of public opinion itself. Rather than claiming the appearance of free indirect discourse to be the result of random chance, Moretti historicizes the technique by claiming that it functions, in the nineteenth century, to convey a tone of optimistic conservatism, a post-(French) revolutionary acceptance of the status quo (or public opinion). However, Moretti allows us to ask more questions about why free indirect discourse *changes* when used by different authors—human nature may be uniform, but free indirect discourse is not. And while Moretti agrees that free indirect discourse is potentially universal in scope—a technique not indigenous to one national literature but instead a part of world literature—he also attends to the ways in which free indirect discourse can take on different characteristics in different contexts. For example, when literary modernists like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf use the device, it often melds into stream-of-consciousness narration. And while Moretti may have a slight political slant when he refers to socialization, such remarks can easily be ignored. What matters here is not an argument about human society but an argument about the relationship between literary form and literary history. I think that evolutionary literary critics could certainly agree with the idea that free indirect discourse takes on different shapes over time (even though they may differ from Moretti on *why* it changes). Jonathan Gottschall, in his book *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (published in 2008), referenced Moretti's work as helpful in providing quantifiable literary data. Hopefully more

evolutionarily-inclined critics will find ways to incorporate Moretti's attention to form and history into their own work.

I'd like to conclude now with the following point. Evolutionary literary theory's focus on narrative is understandable for a movement just getting off the ground. But if, as the evolutionary critics argue, if narrative is an essential component of human nature, then we can expect the proliferation not only of fables and stories but also of cultural meta-narratives that structure and give meaning to human experiences. Changing historical conditions should result in both changing meta-narratives and changing attitudes toward literary forms. By paying attention both to evolutionary psychology and to human history, literary scholars can trace the movement of ideas across time and thus reveal the possibilities for—and limitations of—literary forms, rather than asserting that stylistic devices are somehow directly related to evolutionary conditions of the Pleistocene era. If, as the evolutionary critics argue, there is no Nature/Culture opposition (because culture is part of nature), then hopefully literary scholars can continue to focus on cultural history as well as natural history.

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