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Critical Response

III

An Open Letter to Jonathan Kramnick

Joseph Carroll

We've never met. A friend sent me a link to your article "Against Literary Darwinism."¹ Naturally, I disagree with you on many of the details of your piece, but here I would draw your attention to only one important point. I think you make a large factual error in your core argument. You lump all the "literary Darwinists" together and associate them all with an early and fairly narrow form of evolutionary psychology. You argue that the central error in literary Darwinism is in identifying literature as an adaptation, and you seem half consciously to assume that *adaptive* must mean "modular." That's a mistake.

Ernst Mayr long ago made a basic distinction between closed (equals modular) adaptive systems and open (equals flexible) adaptive systems.² A relatively early form of evolutionary psychology came down hard in favor of "massive modularity," but that issue has been controversial from the beginning. (Steven Mithen's *The Prehistory of the Mind* offered a strong alternative model.)³ The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is a closed system; so is sight; and there is good evidence for language. Kim Sterelny in *Thought in a Hostile World* acknowledges that language is probably modular but makes a compelling case against taking language as the prototype

1. See Jonathan Kramnick, "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Winter 2011): 315–47; hereafter abbreviated "ALD."

2. See Ernst Mayr, "The Evolution of Living Systems," *Evolution and the Diversity of Life: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p. 23.

3. See Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion, and Science* (London, 1996).

for human mental architecture.⁴ Among evolutionists in the social sciences, the more commonly accepted understanding of adaptation affiliates itself with Mayr's idea of a sliding scale, running from the ANS at one end to only lightly constrained behavioral variations at the other end. For a more recent formulation of such ideas, you might consult D. S. Wilson's essay "Evolutionary Social Constructivism," which is included in two anthologies: *The Literary Animal* and *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader*.⁵

In common with a good many other theorists, I often describe early evolutionary psychology—the set of ideas formulated by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides in "The Psychological Foundations of Culture" and by Steven Pinker in *How the Mind Works*—as orthodox or narrow-school EP.⁶ The two literary Darwinists who are most closely affiliated with early EP are Michelle Scalise Sugiyama and the late Denis Dutton. But neither Sugiyama nor Dutton would argue that dispositions for protoliterary forms of behavior are modular in character—that is, encapsulated, automatic, swift, and efficient.⁷

My own central line of thinking for the past dozen years or so has been aimed at producing an account of mental architecture different from that in orthodox EP. In tandem with that different concept of cognitive archi-

4. See Kim Sterelny, *Thought in a Hostile World: The Evolution of Human Cognition* (Oxford, 2003).

5. See David Sloan Wilson, "Evolutionary Social Constructivism," in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and Wilson (Evanston, Ill., 2005), pp. 20–37 and "Evolutionary Social Constructivism," in *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader*, ed. Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Gottschall (New York, 2010), pp. 111–22.

6. See John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "The Psychological Foundations of Culture," in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed. Jerome H. Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby (New York, 1992), pp. 19–136, and Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York, 1977).

7. See Michelle Scalise-Sugiyama, "Reverse-Engineering Narrative: Evidence of Special Design," in *The Literary Animal*, pp. 177–96, and Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York, 2009).

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ture, I've been developing a concept of the adaptive function of literature and the other arts that is described nowhere in your article. In a footnote, you say I mention "in passing" that I've "grown skeptical of modularity"; that's disingenuous. You cite an article from 2008 ("An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study"), then mention that I make a similar point in a review of E. O. Wilson's *Consilience* ("ALD," p. 322 n. 18). The review of *Consilience* was published first in 1999. And indeed, I've been explicitly criticizing the EP conception of the mind since the review of Pinker's *How the Mind Works* was first published in 1998.⁸

The theory of adaptive function that appears in the review of *Consilience* was worked out in greater detail in half a dozen essays before it was recapitulated in "An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study," the essay you link with the review of *Consilience*.⁹ In all those essays, in company with Wilson and others, I argue that literature is adaptive precisely because it is a medium for cognitive flexibility—the exact opposite of modularity. No one reading your piece would have a clue about that.

I think probably what happened was that in your own mind you formulated a plausible general concept of the relations between modularity, adaptations, and literature, falsely attributed that concept to the writers on whom you were commenting, and then, without a great deal of conscious dishonesty, filtered the quotations from the pieces you referenced so that they seemed to fit reasonably enough within the model you had created. You seem to have presupposed that when we spoke of adaptation, we could only mean modularity. That was a false notion that reflects a weak understanding of the theoretical background to the field you undertook to criticize.

Here, for instance, is a passage in which your own faulty construct leads you to mischaracterize the theorists you are criticizing:

8. See Joseph Carroll, "An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study," *Style* 42 (Summer–Fall 2008): 103–35; "Wilson's *Consilience* and Literary Study," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (Oct. 1999): 393–413; and "Steven Pinker's Cheesecake for the Mind," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (Oct. 1998): 478–85.

9. See Carroll, "The Deep Structure of Literary Representations," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 20 (May 1999): 159–73; "Human Nature and Literary Meaning: A Theoretical Model Illustrated with a Critique of *Pride and Prejudice*," *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York, 2004), pp. 187–216; "Literature and Evolutionary Psychology," in *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, N.J., 2005), pp. 931–53; "The Human Revolution and the Adaptive Function of Literature," *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (Apr. 2006): 33–49; "The Adaptive Function of Literature," in *Evolutionary and Neurocognitive Approaches to Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, ed. Colin Martindale, Paul Locher, and Vladimir M. Petrov (Amityville, N.Y., 2007), pp. 31–45; and "Evolutionary Approaches to Literature and Drama," in *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett (Oxford, 2007), pp. 637–49.

Literary Darwinism presupposes the functional specialization of the mind and argues for a special process devoted to art and literature. The case for such a process seems quite thin on the ground. When we consider the plausibility of a literature module or literary competence alongside the properties assumed to belong to other innate faculties of the mind, we seem moved in one of two directions: either a disposition to create and attend to literature just isn't the sort of thing that can be innately specified but is rather subject to more local and historical causes and constraints, or other bits of the mind feed into and have some sort of regular relation with creating and attending to literary texts. It may be then that the interdisciplinary project between literary studies and the sciences of mind is just to sketch out all these relations. ["ALD," p. 343]

This is a fairly common form of polemical sophistry: straw-manning the opposition while delineating a blandly unobjectionable alternative against which the opposition itself could not reasonably protest. "Functional specialization" gets reduced to "literature module," oppositionally equated with "literary competence," and that concept is set in supposed opposition to two ideas: historical causes and constraints and other bits of the mind feeding into literary competence. I know of no literary Darwinists who would use a term like *literature module*. No literary Darwinists would disagree that historical causes and constraints enter into literary constructs, and none would disagree that other bits of the mind feed into literary competence. You are boxing at shadows of your own fabrication.

The sophisticated strategy in passages like the one I've quoted here provides cover for a false dichotomy: biology versus history. You would evidently limit biology to forms of cognition that you yourself recognize as modular (sight, speech), associate them with the analysis of literary form, and leave everything else to "local and historical causes and constraints." That false and half-articulated dichotomy provides the framework within which you give a wrong account of Darwinist conceptions of literature. It also provides the basis for the "beginnings of a research project," only gestured toward in your final paragraph, as your particular contribution to some actual, substantive theory.

Contrast the straw man you construct in the passage I just quoted with this passage from my review of *Consilience*:

One of the most serious deficiencies in standard versions of evolutionary psychology is the commitment to a model of the brain consisting exclusively of domain-specific modules—the "Swiss army knife" model of the brain. . . . By building models of reality, the arts

link all contingent and particular circumstances to the deep structure of elemental motives. They make psychologically meaningful connections between elemental motives and the peculiarities in specific configurations of culture and of individual experience.¹⁰

The idea here is that “human nature” consists in conserved dispositions working in tandem with more recent, specifically human adaptations enabling cognitive and behavioral flexibility. You say that while I’ve “grown skeptical of modularity” I’ve done “little to suggest an alternative architecture that would support the idea that literature is itself an adaptation” (“ALD,” p. 322 n. 18). I certainly have done little, and indeed nothing at all, to suggest that literature itself is modular. Your formulation, buried in a footnote, begs the question as to whether all adaptations are necessarily modules.

“Does little to suggest” is a safe kind of criticism, sufficiently indistinct to avoid being called to account. A critic challenged on the accuracy of such formulations could always ask, “how much is a *little*?” In the essay you mention, “An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study,” the section on the adaptive function of literature runs for ten pages.¹¹ In the “Rejoinder to the Responses” to this essay, in the same volume, the section on the adaptive function of literature and the other arts runs for nineteen pages.¹² And of course similar ideas are discussed at great length in other public fora, including an online discussion hosted by the National Humanities Center.¹³ You’ll observe that the first section in the article on the NHC site is titled “Massive Modularity vs. Cognitive Flexibility.” The second section is titled “Gene-Culture Co-Evolution.”

It seems to me that you haven’t been willing or able to listen to the actual arguments you are criticizing. A misleadingly worded footnote—falsely suggesting a recent and not fully articulated reservation about massive modularity—is no substitute for honest reporting and serious theoretical engagement.

You glancingly mention gene-culture coevolution and brandish it as if it were a refutation of various adaptationist theories about literature (see

10. Carroll, *Literary Darwinism*, pp. 82–83.

11. See Carroll, “An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study,” pp. 349–68.

12. See Carroll, “Rejoinder to the Responses,” *Style* 42 (Summer–Fall 2008): 349–68.

13. See Carroll, “The Adaptive Function of Literature and the Other Arts,” in *On the Human: A Project of the National Humanities Center*, onthehuman.org/2009/06/the-adaptive-function-of-literature-and-the-other-arts/. In a collection of my more recent essays, my commentary on this forum is integrated with earlier discussions of the adaptive function of the arts; see Carroll, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (Albany, N.Y., 2011), pp. 3–54.

“ALD,” pp. 323–24). A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Besides my work available in *Style*, I also now have an essay review that summarizes recent work on gene-culture coevolution and locates it in the context of developments in the evolutionary social sciences over a period of about thirty years.¹⁴ If you’re serious about understanding what the literary Darwinists are up to, it would behoove you to get a better grasp of this historical and theoretical context. I can’t fancy you will ever be sympathetic to the general structure of ideas among the Darwinists, but it would be useful for us and for other readers if you were to gain a more precise and accurate knowledge of your target. Knocking down straw men makes it possible to affirm one’s own core beliefs without having to reassess them. That can be psychologically gratifying, but it isn’t useful to the people you are criticizing or to any readers who are genuinely interested in advancing their own understanding. Useful criticism is criticism that gets a clear, accurate understanding of its subject, probes real weaknesses and limitations in that subject, and thus offers stimulus to further thinking. I’ll be curious to see whether you ever achieve that kind of utility.

14. See Carroll, “Gene-Culture Co-Evolution: An Emerging Paradigm,” *Evolutionary Review* 2, no. 2 (2011): 23–37.