

**Ellen Dissanayake**  
*University of Washington*

**Beyond Words: Can Literary Darwinism Address the Unsaid and Inexpressible in Literary Creation and Response? (2008). *Style* 42 (2,3), 161-165**

**Commentary to Target Article, An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study, by Joseph Carroll**

Joseph Carroll is essentially the founder and the preeminent theorist of Darwinian adaptationist literary study, with an enviable mastery of the subjects relevant to his interests: evolutionary theory (he has written a splendid monograph-length introduction to his own edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*) and evolutionary psychology as well as an enormous amount of Western literature. In addition, he understands statistics and can apply it in his own work; he is also highly conversant with recent advances in cognitive science and neuroscience. He is the obvious first choice to write a target article about the emerging field that is called Literary Darwinism or Darwinian (evolutionary, adaptationist) literary study and *Style* should be commended for presenting to a broad audience this fertile and historically inevitable approach. The curious, the convinced, the skeptical, and even the hostile will be well repaid for their consideration of the article and the commentary it provokes. The list of references is itself a compendium of provocative recent thought about humans and their works (and workings).

Carroll makes an excellent case for the necessity that scholars in the humanities and social sciences be aware of the relevance of biology to their view of the human—what E. O. Wilson has called “consilience.” It is a view that I wholeheartedly share. Participation in and receptivity to the arts are demonstrably part of human nature, from infancy (Dissanayake, “In the Beginning”), and the

human mind, adapted for life in the Pleistocene, is the source of all human thought and behavior. Today when every educated person accepts that an individual human's personality, talents, susceptibility to disease, and indeed all other physical and psychological traits are influenced by genes and DNA, it takes a very blinkered scholar indeed to maintain that "cultural products" (inventions by humans, such as the many different arts) appear willy nilly and can be about anything at all.

My addenda to Carroll's fine synthesis emerge from the rather different paths we have chosen rather than from personal antagonism to his findings or conclusions. On the contrary, I agree with him on just about every point. I suggest, however, that there is additional evolutionarily-related knowledge that literary Darwinists should consider. My own work uses a specifically ethological approach that is concerned with artistic *behavior* more than with finished *works* such as stories or novels or the *qualitative features* that make these better or worse than each other. I deal with nonverbal arts, primarily music, which in its origins and indeed today in many parts of the world would seem to have included rhythmic movement or dance as part of the same activity. I view all the arts as products of what I now call "artification"—that is, treating ordinary objects, surroundings, sounds, movements, words, themes, motifs, ideas, and so forth in specified ways that make them *extra*-ordinary. These specified ways are the devices or "operations" on ordinary behavior that are used instinctively by other animals in ritualized behaviors—formalization, repetition, exaggeration, elaboration, and manipulation of expectation. Humans use these intentionally or consciously to artify (or "make special") their experience. Evidence of this kind of behavior can be found as early as 100,000 years ago if not earlier. Bednarik finds evidence of artification as early as 900-200kya, if one accepts carefully carved cupules and

incised lines on rocks as examples of modifying objects and surroundings and red ochre fragments as decorating the body. It is also likely that, like the arts in recent premodern or traditional societies, early arts were participative and communal or, in the case of petroglyphs and pictographs, the occasion for ritual/ceremonial behavior. Artification is in my view a behavioral proclivity that—like speaking, tool-using and making, and infant attachment—benefits all members of a society, not only a talented few.

This is not the place for a full exposition of my views about the evolution of the arts, but the foregoing paragraph provides enough background for what I see as unaddressed subject areas and perhaps problems for Darwinian literary study. (They are problems for other schools of literary study too insofar as these ignore our Pleistocene past and the lives of our hunter-gatherer ancestors whose way of life over hundreds of thousands of generations molded our behavior and emotions).

In my view, humans were artificers long before they were able to write and read, perhaps even before they were able to speak or speak well. As Carroll points out, the earliest literature would have been oral. I would suggest that there has not been sufficient time for evolution to have acted specifically on reading as an adaptation. Indeed, reading is a quite recent cognitive or behavioral acquisition. It relies on the invention of writing in the Neolithic period, the use of specifically alphabetic writing, and eventually the invention and widespread use of the printing press. Literacy is a specialized skill and only a small percent of all humans who have ever lived can read and even fewer read fluently or for pleasure. Learning to read changes the brain and behavior of individuals and the cultures they live in so that there are significant differences between preliterate and literate individuals and societies (Ong; Leavis; Wolf).

Reading, which is not an adaptation, has obviously emerged from the human penchant (need?) for listening to and telling *stories*, apparently a human universal. Reading is a solitary act and listening/telling a social one. At the transition, people gathered in a crowd to be read to (Leavis)—still a social experience, like the participatory experiences in the arts that predominate in societies that have not undergone the process of modernity.

The work by Gottschall and others on cross-cultural and oral literature is welcome and I hope there will be more. But there is something else to be learned about preliterate literature than the way it reveals the human mind and its perennial concerns. Even before (and alongside) the telling and hearing of stories, I think a case can be made that our ancestors artfied their voices and speech for incantations, magical spells, lamentation—expressive verbal/vocalizations that make more or less use of understandable words. That is, they may have intended to produce musical (nonverbal) emotional effects more than to depict events with narrative meaning. I suggest that a significant portion of our response even to literature of today has to do with non-depictive or nonverbal aspects. In poetry, it is not only the paraphrased “story” or even subject matter of the poem (e.g., lost love, thoughts about dying, a sea voyage) that is memorable and affecting. There are passages in literature and especially poetry—and film—that have stunning or even indescribable-but-unforgettable emotional residue that comes from image, sound, structure or unfolding in time, and whatever can be suggested beyond words. This residue cannot be subsumed by Basic Emotions theory.

One might say that like Western classical music (also the product of *musical* literacy—a first carefully composed and then published score that can be read and performed by others), written literature is the product of people who can work and

rework their creations in order to make possible a kind of sophisticated response in readers that goes beyond the fundamental human response to the underlying elements of the story. Oral literature and improvised music have their own significant rewards and can produce gripping or transfiguring experiences—think of well-told tales and the music traditions of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia—but the possibilities for manipulation of emotion by published literature and music have provided new sorts of appreciation in readers and listeners that are unavailable to oral, improvised renderings. Concepts without distinct referents—”poetic truth,” the “inexpressible”—are elements that some people value in novels by Woolf, Proust, or Emily Bronte and in much poetry, as much as or more than the fundamentals of the story. These have to do with *the way* in which the story is presented. My own scheme of aesthetic operations—formalization, repetition, exaggeration, repetition, and manipulation of expectation—does not pin down the unpinnable, either, but I would like to see Literary Darwinists at least acknowledge the aesthetic/emotional reward of this aspect of reading, and locate its origin in *affective* (not purely cognitive) neuroscience. Cognitive science makes much of symbolic representations, but in music it is the *analogical rather than symbolic* meanings that carry affect. The arts, including literature, also make important use of synaesthetic effects that engage all the senses. Studies in *affective* neuroscience and in the cognitive neuroscience of music might be a good place to look for models of how to approach these less-traveled but important component of literary/artistic response (for example, Malloch and Trevarthen; Panksepp, *Affective*).

Adaptationist literary scholars should also remember that the experience of literature, like music, may not be as aesthetically high-minded as I just described. Many people who read do not read fiction (stories) and those who read fiction often

read what most of us who read *Style* would call CrapLit. People read fiction for escape, titillation, vicarious adventure, and to kill time in an airplane or on the beach. Nancy Pearl, a Seattle librarian, has written *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust*, in which she recommends fiction for readers of varied tastes: some primarily want a good plot, some historical sweep and atmosphere, some are most interested in character: she presents nearly two hundred categories and subcategories. Pearl's readers seem to have distinct personality types. Where do they fit into Carroll's psychological scheme as *readers*? Are they like the personality types of literary characters? Writers too would seem to excel in one or another category. Carroll has mentioned character, setting, and plot as constituting aspects of literary representations but these appeal differentially to various sorts of readers or writers too.

I feel sure that Professor Carroll would not disagree with most of what I say in this commentary, which presents ideas that are of special interest to me. It is more a matter of emphasis and personal predilection than of criticism or challenge. My remarks are not meant to suggest inadequacies or deficiencies in the superlative work done by Carroll and the other Literary Darwinists whom he mentions. I bring them up here as interesting and relevant things to think about and I hope that scholars who are attracted to the field might find them worth considering in the future.

I would also suggest that those who dismiss or ridicule adaptationist thinking audit a good course in—or read a good introduction to—human behavior and evolution before making their pronouncements.