



WHAT IF THE NATURAL CLASSICISTS WON THE CULTURE WARS?

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The purpose of this group is to study the relations between biology and the arts. The reason why this is a compelling mission is that in the dominant theoretical paradigm of at least the last fifty years, it has been taken as self-evident that if biology has any influence on the production and reception of art, such influence is overwhelmed by cultural forces. In this kind of constructivist atmosphere, all the questions that students of aesthetics ask--questions concerning the nature, value, and purpose of art--are referred to one of the many tribunals in the duchy of culture. Since the the ultimate source of truth and value is assumed to be economics, ideology, or simply power, the proper way to study art is as a subset of cultural studies. Within such a world view, there is very little room to investigate the biological underpinnings of art for the simple reason that under the constructivist's lens biology is no less a product of cultural forces than art. In fact, for many cultural critics, even to refer to biology is proof of a tendency toward, at best, reductionism, and at worst, fascism.

Since we are still living under the constructivist umbrella (although it is beginning to wear thin in places, and a little light is starting to seep in), the central contention of this group, that biology isn't merely an ideological construct but that it has a real and perhaps substantial influence on the

production and reception of art, is both daring and crucial. It is a task of immense importance to begin to chip away at the nearly religious certainty in the main bastions of the western university that the study of biology can have no bearing on the study of art. However, as we undertake this task, it might be useful to stand back from the fray for while and ask a highly speculative question: If our culture were to accept the deep connection between biology and aesthetics, how would the production and the reception of art be affected. Or, more simply, if we (the members of this panel and our allies) had our way, what kind of world would we help create?

In his seminal book **The Culture of Hope**, Fred Turner argues that we are currently in a midst of a war between the cultural left and the cultural right. Although I couldn't possibly hope to reproduce the richness and complexity of Turner's argument here, I don't think it would be grossly unfair to characterize his central point as follows: although the left and the right think of themselves as occupying diametrically opposite positions on the ideological spectrum, they are in fact very similar insofar as they conceptualize value as a finite quantity. The left seeks to redistribute value, while the right strives to conserve past value from the ravages of the barbaric present, but both the left and the right see the economics of value as a zero-sum game. They agree that there is a stockpile of value; they only disagree on what to do with it. As opposed to this hidden complicity between the left and the right, Turner proposes a view he attributes, perhaps with his tongue in the vicinity of his cheek, to the radical center. According to this position, there is not a fixed amount of value in the

universe. Value is something that can be created or destroyed, and, according to Turner, it is the responsibility of a culture, through its inventiveness and creativity, to facilitate the emergence of new kinds of value.

I agree with Turner. For the purposes of this essay I would like to investigate the consequences on the production and reception of one kind of art, literature, if the wider culture joined me in subscribing to Turner's views. For the sake of clarity, I will divide my observations into two sections. First, I will speculate on the consequences of wide cultural acceptance of what Turner has elsewhere labeled "natural classicism" on literary criticism. Then I will do the same for the production of art. In order to focus my discussion, I will concentrate on one of the many propositions of natural classicism: the hypothesis that the human brain has a natural propensity to organize its world in terms of narrative.

A. Literary Criticism in a Natural Classical World

The traditional role of criticism has been to explicate literary texts. In the period following WW II, this role has modulated to the point that today literary criticism is often referred to as literary theory. Literary theory, or, as it is usually called these days, simply "theory," sees its role not so much as the reflection as the generation of literary meaning. However, theory doesn't to about the business of creating literary meaning in the traditional way, through the use of characters and narrative, but by seeking to alter the

interpretative horizon against which readers encounter literature. Most schools of contemporary theory, chief among which are deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, reader response, and new historicism, are engaged in constructing matrices for reading, grids through which certain kinds of interpretations are highlighted and others are obscured. The result of this shift is that graduate students in literature departments are taught to see literature as subordinate to criticism. One of the traditional functions of literature, to influence its own conditions of readability, has now been relegated to criticism. Even a cursory glance at most literary journals being published today or at the typical kind of panel at meetings such as the MLA will suggest that the most common use of literary texts is as a mine of evidence to bolster some brand of theory. In other words, whereas in the past critics might have cited extra-literary sources in the attempt to illuminate a literary work or passage, in the contemporary academy, literary sources are usually deployed to legitimize or naturalize a school of theory which then, in a feedback loop, influences the range of meanings we attribute to literary texts and, at a few removes, what kinds of literature tend to be produced.

Interestingly missing from the pantheon of sources of contemporary theory is science. One might object that societies such as the SLS (The Society for the Study of Science and Literature) are precisely sites where science is used as a critical methodology. However, the typical use to which science is put in the kind of work associated with organizations like the SLS is not as the source of ideas but as the object of cultural analyses. The

reason for this state of affairs is the underlying family resemblance that unites the various schools of theory: the assumption that meaning, value, and truth are the products of cultural forces. Science, therefore, is typically treated as a cultural phenomenon, as the expression of ideological, economic, technological, or “power” forces, not as the dispassionate search for truth. If science is merely a cog in what is usually called the “social construction of nature,” then biology, with its sinister connotations of reductionism or biological determinism, is especially suspect of such ideological underwear and is therefore a chief object of deconstruction or demystification.

Theory, then, has subsumed the primacy of both literature and science, situating both of these disciplines as rich sources of grist for the cultural critic’s mill. Literary and biological texts are no longer seen as sources of knowledge but as historical artifacts whose importance is that they can provide the cultural critic sticks with which to construct his or her theory. As things stand today, therefore, any investigation of the biological underpinnings of literature would in fact be an analysis of the perhaps hidden cultural (that is, ideological) correspondences between literary and scientific constructions of reality. In such an optic, since neither biology nor literature would be viewed as semi-autonomous sources of knowledge, their conjunction, as in the theme of this group, would be viewed as vaguely redundant.

It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, to what use narrative is typically put in this constellation of theory. Whether narrative is understood as

inherently oppressive because it participates in a metaphysical or patriarchal or capitalist world view or whether it is subjected to analyses to tease out the ideological forces structuring its “unconscious,” narrative is typically understood as a cultural choice serving specific cultural interests. Therefore, if in the still dominant academic paradigm it is reasonable to expect the suggestion that literature might have biological underpinnings to be met with cynicism, then, **a fortiori**, one should don one’s raincoat before offering the proposition that narrative is an expression of a universal biological predisposition.

How, then, would criticism change if the “cultural paradigm” were to be eclipsed and a new world view emerged, a world view in which it would sound unremarkable to claim that human brains have, as a result of our long evolutionary history, certain preferences in the way they organize the world and that among these preferences is the complex causal frame known as narrative?

From my point of view, most of the changes I envision for criticism should such a paradigm shift occur would be positive; however, progress never comes without a price, and it is important to be aware of some of the pitfalls that might accompany such a shift.

Clearly, the kind of cultural transformation I am considering would entail a renewed interest in psychology and neurobiology. Instead of searching for the ideological subtexts in science, critics might join with scientists and social scientists in investigating the neural underpinnings for narrative. If, as I suspect, the causal frame is hard wired into the way the

brain organizes incoming information, then research at both the psychological and the neurobiological levels is likely to uncover specific mechanisms whereby the brain narrativizes its world. Having established the general principle that narrative is not an ideological mechanism (although it certainly could be used in ideological ways, and undoubtedly always is), then a rich field of research would be opened into various types of narratives. Such work would resemble the interesting research begun by the early Structuralists before their work was hijacked by Post-Structuralism. For example, the kind of typology of different forms of narrative that was one of the foci of the Structuralists could be expanded into a general anthropological investigation of the cross cultural palette of narratives which could then be related to what I suspect is a kind of “deep narrative” along the lines of Chomsky’s transformational grammar.

On a broader, cultural level, such a change in focus would tend to dampen the near obsessive emphasis on ideology in literary criticism and begin to highlight the autonomous, non-derivative function of literary language in general and narrative in particular. Instead of hiding behind the glib assumption that narrative is a hammer that some group uses to bang some other group, the academy would begin to see narrative as an evolutionary adaptation with survival value on its own. Instead of the currently hegemonic Cartesian split between culture and nature, we would begin to conceptualize culture as existing in a co-evolutionary relationship with nature. Much of our adolescent cynicism might thereby be dissipated, to be replaced by a more sober view that, while it makes room for the role

ideology plays in the construction of reality, doesn't fetishize ideology as the sole creator of reality. Evolution and biology don't offer the totalizing and frequently paranoid neatness of ideology, so I think that the creationist pretenses of contemporary cultural critics might benefit from a little of what the Ancient Greeks understood through their gods: that whenever humans think they can speak for nature, nature usually leaves a few gentle reminders that even though she's married to culture, she doesn't care to have her sentences finished by her puffed up spouse.

To summarize, the positive effects of the paradigm shift about which I am speculating would involve a healthy integration of nature into culture. Among the desirable features of such an integration would be a growing suspicion of claims made by literary theorists that have no empirical evidence, a new reliance on experiment in the study of literature, and increasing intolerance of obscurantism and verbal showing off. Ultimately, if we were to begin to see narrative in particular and literature in general as a culturally universal phenomenon, then we might begin to rehabilitate the status of literature--seeing it as Joseph Carroll suggests, as an evolutionary adaptation that offers those who possess it certain adaptive advantages. It would then be conceivable that we might witness the end of the decades' long descent of literature into its current bipolar state: on the one hand as grist for the mill of academic critics whose work, focused as it is on smug ideological analyses, deprives students of one of their greatest needs, the need to be permitted to give themselves over to the power and beauty of literature; and, on the other hand, as a popular, escapist art form that the

public craves but which the academy reviles or patronizes.

The pitfalls I see of such a transformation all reduce to one essential danger: the growth of a new critical orthodoxy that shuns the essence of the scientific method--open-minded skepticism. I can envision an academy populated by natural classical thought police laying down the law on the kinds of narrative that are acceptable and ostracizing forms of literary language it deems heretical. It would of course be highly ironic if such an orthodoxy were to develop since natural classical critics ought to be acutely aware of the importance of the bizarre and eccentric in any evolutionary schema, but the legions of humans butchered in the name of universal love suggests that institutional sclerosis is certainly capable of repressing some of the fundamental principles that undergird a given institution. It is also a peculiar and understandable tendency in individual and group psychology that when a rebellious minority finally ascends to power it is tempted to seek revenge against its former rulers with an iron hand. That, plus the tendency of some thinkers who might be attracted to natural classicism toward a kind of ascetic fundamentalism, suggests the danger of a kind of reign of terror. As much as I dislike the work writers like Robbe-Grille and Mac Wellman, and as much as i wish that they would choke in the fetid air of non-recognition, still I support their efforts not merely in the name of artistic first-amendment rights but because their work might represent the infusion of healthy variations into the dynamics of contemporary literature. My bet is that they don't, but i see no reason to be dogmatic about it, and such dogmatism is, I believe, the greatest risk run by a culture that has accepted

natural classical principles.

In no particular order, here are a few other potential dangers of the ascension to power of natural classicism: 1. The temptation to use reductionist analyses to explain phenomena that require a nature-culture coevolutionary approach. 2. A kind of quid pro quo regarding political viewpoints that would seek to marginalize them just as they are currently marginalizing natural classicism. We need to study the political and ideological components of art just we need to understand the biological foundations of culture. 3. The proclivity of natural classicism to attract well meaning but vacuous airy-fairy, new agey kinds of perspectives. 4. The equal but opposite tendency to attract osteoporotic Allan Bloom type prigs. 5. The danger that a certain kind of art will be so favored that it will become a new kind of orthodoxy favoring predictable and uninteresting work.

B. Creative Writing in a Natural Classical World

Mass popularity tends to select against the kind of trendiness associated with postmodernism. Although, for example, the world of the novel and of the film has certainly not been immune to influences from the kind of interpretative umbrella described in Part A of this essay (consider for example, the MTV quality of many action-adventure-scifi movies coming out of Hollywood these days), they have been more resistant to it than poetry and theater. The reason for the difference in immune response is

due to the relative hegemony that the academic world and its near kin have on forms of art that have little commercial appeal. As a literary agent once told me, if the next Faulkner came along he might represent him, but what he's really looking for is the next Grisham. In long fiction, at least, the market pressures of literary agents and influential editors at the important publishing houses select for kinds of fiction that are likely to have commercial success. And to have commercial success, novels need a good dose of the traditional stuff: recognizable characters and a compelling plot. Theater, with its traditional emphasis on spectacle, is, of course, different. However, even with theater, it does appear that the less likely a play is to be financially successful, the less likely it is to have believable characters and a strong plot. The Caryl Churchills and Erik Ehns of the world eke out a marginal living playing to small audiences that have been educated to appreciate their sort of theater or who go because it is the thing to do.

My point is that whereas with some rare exceptions academic critics are like modernist artists in their distaste for mass appeal, usually limiting their potential audience to the academy and its penumbra, a much larger percentage of creative writers aspire to some kind of popular success, if for no other reason than it helps to pay the bills. There are still many writers out there who carry on the venerable tradition that equates a wide readership with selling out (a lot of them, however, are teaching creative writing in the academy), but even they, I suppose, would not refuse a fat royalty check or a Nobel (of course, sometimes refusing a Nobel might gain

one more visibility than simply accepting one, and visibility always has its financial rewards). Therefore, I believe that the natural classical revolution, whose potential victory in what Turner labels the culture wars is the subject of this paper, would have more of an influence on theory than on creative writing. Nevertheless, its effects on creators of literary art would not be insignificant, and it is to such effects that I now turn.

An obvious transformation that would begin in the event of a shift to a natural classical paradigm would involve the rehabilitation in “high” literature of traditional narrative forms. Not only would fiction writers and dramatists develop a renewed interest in narrative, they might also engage in cross-cultural research into folk narrative which they would begin to look on as a source of inspiration. And, in the course of such research, a second interesting revision might occur. The modern artist tends to see himself or herself as cut off the rest of the world. And if, as is the case of many modernist and postmodernist artists, they are smitten with a touch of primitivism, typically what they look for in traditional cultures is what they want to find: license to indulge in non-narrative and non-representational art. However, if one looks at traditional art dispassionately, it is arguable that if the grain of human art is non-realistic, it is also massively narrative and exclusively representational (of course, what is being represented varies, and usually the object of representation is non-human therefore demanding formal techniques that don’t have a photographic quality). In a natural classical world, writers would mine traditional culture not simply to find ways to establish their anti-bourgeois credentials but to find inspiration

in the astonishingly imaginative ways that our ancestors have woven variations on the basic subject-verb-object causal frame.

Two other possible changes are worth mentioning. First, as the continuing accumulation of knowledge of the biological underpinnings of narrative coupled with cross-cultural studies of different narrative traditions leads to the rising value of traditional plots, writers might begin to exploit the inherently richer cognitive resources available to narrative. Whereas in the modernist and postmodernist high art periods it has been generally assumed that only kind of literary knowledge worth having is that which is encoded in a highly self-referential, verbally unstable, and narratively discontinuous work, in a natural classical environment what will begin to emerge is the idea that “writerly” texts tend in fact to be extremely information poor. Like garden soil that has been force fed on a diet of high nitrogen synthetic fertilizers, such writing may give the reader a quick fix of literary energy, but its inherent lack of balance and complexity will leave him or her starving in the long run. Traditional narratives, like organic gardening techniques, may appear to be oppressively retrograde and, in the eyes of some, hopelessly out of place in our information rich world, but in fact they are remarkably complex technologies capable of maintaining a tremendous range of different, and intimately related, subsystems. Simply, a recrudescence of interest in narrative will allow artists to tap not only the mind’s predisposition to organize the world in narrational terms but also the evolutionary reason for such a development, that narrative is capable of storing and generating and torquing an enormous amount of knowledge.

The last possible beneficent effect of a renaissance in traditional narrative forms that I would like to discuss is a fundamental change in attitude. During most of the twentieth century, the artist has seen his or her role as a revolutionary. What typically constitutes praise for literary work are such qualifiers as “original,” “ground breaking,” “unprecedented,” and “radical.” Such an emphasis on the discontinuous is itself discontinuous with the near entirety of human history. Of course, it could be argued that our culture has so changed that the artist can no longer see himself or herself as an agent in cultural continuity but must be aligned with the forces of dehiscence. That may very well be, but it is also possible that the contemporary artist is a rebel because he or she doesn’t have a cause. It is therefore imaginable that a change in the fundamental valuation criteria from those favoring disruption to those favoring continuity might in fact be more adaptive to the culture we are developing (and that’s developing us) because narrative is in fact more capable of both generating and nurturing genuine innovation than literary terrorism.

The potential negative impact of the acceptance of a natural classical paradigm in the literary world mirror those in the theory community. Zealots or ideologues of all kinds, whether they write from the pulpit of the professor or the desk of the writer, tend to wage religious war against infidels. As evolution has shown us, there is no way to regulate or predict progress. Evolution must be free to range among numerous variations, most of which will be discarded as either insipid or malignant, before it latches on to one that may have adaptive advantages. Similarly, writers ought to be free to

mess around in dark corners and seedy neighborhoods even if most of their adventures result in little of any value. My feeling is that they will anyway, but if a natural classical thought police were to develop it would likely push them underground where their in your face anti-disciplinarian tendencies would calcify into organized and willful rebellion. Much better would be a world which, even if the top of the food chain is occupied by natural classicists, still made all kinds of artists welcome.

Conclusion

If, as Fred Turner has argued, we are currently in the middle of culture wars, then those of us on the natural classical side must go into battle armed with a kind of tragic awareness that although it seems that we are fighting the good fight, we can never be quite sure and besides, even if we convince ourselves that God is on our side, we might one day have to take arms against our own allies if they have begun to paint the streets red with the fruit of the guillotine. Or we might actually be on the wrong side, waging a rear guard campaign against the noble artists whom the future will canonize as martyrs while we will be reviled as fat cardinals looming over Galileo with a dungeon full of arguments why he should sign his recantation. Such tragic skepticism is, I believe, the only possible way to inoculate oneself against the possibility of one's own complicity with the enemy.

But in the end, there is one argument that I find compelling. To be frank, I'm not absolutely convinced by any of the other positions I've

defended in his paper. For example, I can't shake the feeling that there is something stodgy about the whole natural classical movement, something fat and Republican about it. Although I know that even in my profligate youth I never really liked the products of self-styled revolutionary art, at times I thought I did. Then, as now, I was attracted to stories of Rimbaud living underneath the bridges of Paris or Proust holing himself up in his "womb with a view." And, even as I understand that its power is based on the hijacking of traditional narrative, I still find Derrida's apocalyptic announcement of the end of philosophy stirring.

However, even as I try to be as cautious as I can, and urge others to be equally careful, I have one major source of support and consolation. It's a simply idea, really, but one that has been moth balled of late. We have become so drunk with the idea that truth is contextual that we have forgotten that contexts have contexts and that this embedding isn't infinitely regressive because it tends to form a hierarchy. So, even though linguistic truth claims are certainly dependent of the kinds of cultural environments Foucault talks about, the cultural contexts themselves are based on anthropological foundations, which are themselves dependent on biological bases and so on and so forth. This kind of argument is old hat for anyone versed in the kind of evolutionary cosmological perspective Turner discusses with such elegance. But what has occasionally been missed is that science is the human cultural institution invented to drill down through the layers of sedimented cosmological history and, using the feedback between theory and experiment, try to formalize the regularities it locates

there. What this means is that science is the best technique we have yet developed to discover truth. And although science doesn't do a very good job of inventing truth (leaving some work for artists, essayists, and philosophers), it has given us a process whereby the effects of the cultural constructions of truth can be controlled (although never eliminated), and, through time, certain robust kinds of truths attain a kind of stability that can impersonate indisputability. What we sometimes tend to forget in our theory feeding frenzy, where, having smelled the blood of truth in the water we slash and tear at the poor beast until it is reduced to a carcass, is that it is the ethical responsibility of human beings to engage in a kind of epistemological ecology, protecting the truth as much as we are able. And if in our postmodern world we realize that the truth we must preserve and nurture is never free from cultural influences and not likely ever to be Platonic, if we must accept the tragic responsibility of seeking something we know we will never find in its entirety, or that perhaps might not be the sort of thing that has an entirety, then it makes the search for truth that much more indispensable. If for no other reason than that natural classicism is the one of the few available philosophical and critical paradigms that confronts science on its own terms, as science to be respected not as a literary text to be interpreted, then it seems to me that our commitment to it is an ethical as well as a cognitive imperative.