

**Oliver Bock**

## **Evolutionary Takes on Literature**

- »Telling Stories.« **Evolution and Literature – The Evolution of Literature. Conference, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, 22–24 May 2009.**

The consideration of the Theory of Evolution has gained much momentum in recent years among literary scholars. Judging by the increasing number of publications in this particular field and by the amount of debating currently to be seen during the so dubbed Darwin Year, the time seems particularly apt to convene and discuss the relation between his work and the human inclination for telling stories. The conference »Telling Stories.« Evolution and Literature – The Evolution of Literature«, a joint effort by Professors **Carsten Gansel** (Gießen) and **Dirk Vanderbeke** (Jena), sought to address several key issues in this debate. The bilingual (German and English) conference brought together more than 30 participants delivering their papers during the course of three days.

In the keynote paper opening the conference, **Joseph Carroll** (St. Louis) reminded the participants of the current critical status of Evolutionary Theory within the post-modern theoretical framework and its interpretive multitudes. His strong emphasis upon the undoubted relevance of Darwinian thought within the humanities and upon the appeal of its sound empirical basis certainly set the key tone for all papers following in the course of the conference. On the beginning of the second day **Karl Eibl** (München) stressed the importance of apparently evolved and thereby useful cultural patterns as narrative schemata, recurring repetitively throughout narratives of diverse provenance that try to meet a universal standard of successful narrative. Further papers of keynote character included **Brian Boyd**'s (Auckland) who, on the beginning of the third day, again took up the cause of pleading the relevance of Darwinian thought on a fundamental level and expounded Joseph Carroll's argument with a range of examples that again shed light on the notion of certain evolved patterns underlying not only narrative but also the interpretation and criticism of literature. **Olaf Breidbach** (Jena) offered a biologist's perspective in his contribution on the human neurobiological framework that shapes and determines narration and cognitive processing. Breidbach's method for understanding these processes was the analysis of language as the necessary tool that shapes, orders and determines cognitive processings for a specific culture.

During the different sections and plenary sessions three major issues arose from the contributions. First, the connection between evolutionary principles and especially evolutionary psychology on the one hand and narratological perspectives on literature on the other. Second, the transfer of principles of evolving development in nature to the field of literature, concerning issues such as the development and evolvement of literary forms and the literary canon. Third, the application of evolutionary principles to individual literary texts.<sup>1</sup>

**Katja Mellmann** set a striking example for the first aforementioned issue in her paper about narration as biological adaptation. She explored the various variants in which the inclination and ability to narrate could be evaluated in an evolutionary context. Ultimately ruling out the possibilities of narration as either purely accidental or genuinely adaptive she arrived at the conclusion of understanding the ability to narrate as a necessary by-product and as an advantageous result of human evolution that enables humans to store and share information. In a similar vein **Dirk Vanderbeke** (Jena) introduced the notion of narration as an exaptational feature of human culture into the debate, thereby engaging the idea of the ability to narrate as

an ultimately advantageous trait in the process of sexual selection. With this proposition narration is understood as the appropriation of a particular evolved trait which earlier served another function. In fairness though, Vanderbeke stressed that this view holds true especially when narration is understood in the relatively young (speaking in terms of evolutionary chronology) sense of fiction and literature, whereas narration in the broader sense as a means to store and share information may still be more than a simple by-product of evolution, possibly providing an advantage in a time and environment when there were no better ways for preserving information and projecting future plans than organizing issues such as these within a narrative.

Concerning the applicability of an evolutionary model of development for the literary canon **Robert Charlier** (Berlin) set out to demonstrate how such a model might work. He especially considered the importance of the new virtual spheres of automated rankings and relevance evaluations shaping the modern canon within internet search engines and similar devices and contrasted these processes with earlier canon-shaping forces like professional literary criticism and scholarly schools. On the level of genre development **Erika Rundle** (South Hadley) outlined a new theory of drama, culminating in a novel paradigm of *Evolutionary Performance*, which presented a departure from traditional concepts of the Dramatic and the Epic Theatre. **Jörg Richter** (Berlin) focused on the development of evolutionary aesthetics in English and American Theory at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, and he showed that proto-modern models of evolutionary criticism were under discussion not long after Darwin's groundbreaking publications.

The application of evolutionary theory on individual texts was demonstrated by a number of participants. **R.H.A. Corbey** and **Angus Mol** (Tilburg/Leiden) pondered upon the relevance of costly signalling theory in *Beowulf*, aiming for a more complete understanding of certain social phenomena in the text. **Mathias Clasen** (Aarhus) very effectively showed how horror fiction depends upon deeply inherent biological configurations of fear and dread. Further application in that particular line included **Bonnie Broughton** (Jena) on E.L. Doctorow and **Anja Müller-Wood** (Mainz) on Shakespeare.

Several participants expressed their hope during the final plenary discussion of the conference that the presented papers will be published as intended by the organizers of the conference in a bilingual collection, thereby reflecting the interdisciplinary approach and international dimension of the event. Other contributions during the final session showed that even after this vast amount of stimulating and thought-provoking papers offered in the course of the conference, some controversies remain. Beginning with the wish for a better understanding of the precise meaning of *evolution* in the context of literary studies in contrast to the natural sciences, up to the fundamental difference of interpreting literature as an evolving or merely developing phenomenon, the close of the conference revealed some of the yet unsolved issues in this debate and thereby provided a perspective on future work within this still emerging (and possibly evolving) field of literary criticism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for this report the number of papers delivered is too numerous to mention each topic and participant individually. The following remarks concerning the briefly outlined three major issues will thus be illustrated each with the mention of only a few exemplary papers.

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