



¹Università degli Studi di Cassino, Dipartimento di Linguistica e Letterature Comparate Via Bellini 1, 03043 Cassino (anatolepierre.fuksas@unicas.it)

While Darwinism still faces incredible and scientifically unacceptable skepticism as a naturalistic theory about the origins of living species, 'natural selection' and 'struggle for survival' keep being abused as any concept can be in the field of human sciences and, lately, even in the humanities, namely the theory of the literature. Indeed, a couple of recent books, Joseph Carroll's *Literary Darwinism. Evolution, Human Nature and Literature* (New York-London, Routledge, 2004) and a collection of studies about *The Literary Animal. Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2004), edited by Johnatan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, basically defined literature as an actual factor in the adaptation and natural selection of the human species. Both of them collected a good share of negative criticism, mostly due to the polemic overtones and the lack of documentation and/or consistency showed by many of their contributions. So-called 'literary darwinism' has even been criticized from a darwinist point of view by Steven Johnson, as it will happen in here in a partially different (and probably more radical) way.

The general problem with Literary Darwinism and *The Literary Animal* basically concerns the question underlying the collected contributions, that is "why" literature should be considered an "adaptive feature" and "how" literature "evolved" as an evolutionary asset. Indeed, all the «why» approaches, as «why» the mammals evolved the ear from a gill, «why» the horse evolved a single finger when he got four, deal with the actual outcomes as evolutionary goals, not just as the aftermath of evolutionary processes relying on differential variation regulated by natural selection. Basically, self-proclaimed literary darwinists adopt a very deterministic approach to the Evolutionary Theory, never maintained by Darwin himself, offering a series of «evolutionary fairy tales», as Stephen Jay Gould might have very likely called them.

Moreover, the particular problem basically concerns the fact that evolution of speech is certainly a biological event, whereas the discovery of literature is definitely one of a cultural kind, as Alvin Lieberman wisely observed (*The Relation of Speech to Reading and Writing*, in *Orthography, Phonology, Morphology, and Meaning*, ed. by R. Frost and L. Katz, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1992, pp. 167-178). Since literacy just arose some 10000 years ago, so that the *Homo Sapiens-Sapiens* survived 99.9% of his evolutionary history without literacy. Whatever so called darwinian explanation of such a late feature of human culture, started some half a million years ago, looks pretty hazardous, even considering oral narratives as avatars of literary ones (why not *Narrative Darwinism* and *The Narrative Animal*, then?). Hence, instead of investigating causes as a starting point, that is looking for the "big bang of literature", a more reasonable darwinistic approach to literature, originally maintained and recently developed by Franco Moretti (*Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, London, Verso, 2005), actually deals with the descent and evolution of literary forms, as the divergence of genres, through time and space, circumscribing the period of interest to the age of literacy or its segments so to look for turning points in the curve of an evolutionary process that is still running.

Indeed, storytelling can develop in infinite directions. Humans can tell circular, intertwined, very complicated, atemporal, parallel, out of topic, very confused stories, and usually they do. The western standard of storytelling could have eventually developed through history into any of the various casual formats a narrative can take as a report of events in natural conversation. So, why the mainstream story format evolved into a linear, oriented and concluded narrative, a chain of events connected by consistent logical ties? In other words, why a modern reader who enters a bookshop finds himself surrounded by novels? Moreover, the novel itself could have evolved through his relatively short history into a different genre, ruled by some fully different principles of consistency. So, why it simply did not happened? Some very celebrated novels as James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Finnegan's *Wake* failed to set a standard for English novels. Likewise, the extremely inventive Carlo Emilio Gadda's ones failed doing the same for Italian literature. Basically, such 'mutated individuals', as many others throughout western literatures failed to breed and develop into new species. So, why any attempt to break, to twist, eventually to avoid the general format of the novel resulted in an evolutionary failure?

Some interesting clues may eventually come from a couple of papers about Letteratura e darwinismo ('Darwinism and the Literature'), that Ugo Angelo Canello published in Padova in 1882, while Lessona, Canestrini e Saccardo were still busy translating in Italian the complete works of Charles Darwin for the UTET publisher, based in Torino (1872 and 1890). The debate on the evolutionary theory was spreading all around Europe, when Canello, one of the early pioneers of Romance Philology, openly referred to Darwin's *Descent of the Man* while contesting the romanticist esthetic of the «arts for the arts», that is the Schlegel's assumption of art being unnecessary and just aimed to please, adopted in Italy by the very celebrated literary critic De Sanctis. Essentially, Canello adopted a positivistic point of view, based on Darwin's *Descent of the man*. He defined the literature, and the arts in general, as a purposeful evolutionary tool, meant to establish the benchmarks of the sexual fitness and reproductive success.

In Canello's view, visual arts define the standards of male and female beauty, that is their effectiveness in the natural and cultural environment and the expected ability to ensure the survival, growth and social achievement of the offspring. In other words, the bodies painted and sculpted by artists through the human history of the arts have to be considered as the true indicators of the ideal partner's genetic fitness.

The evolutionary effectiveness of the literature is more remarkable into the field of the human ethology. The literature have to be considered as a device aimed to describe, to show, and usually to worship the selective behaviors that allow the establishing of the family, regarded as the milestone of any human society. The typical topic of novels, epics, plays and fiction in general is the struggle for sexual reproduction, according to the fact that narratives are about the differential selection of behaviors ensuring the reproductive success.

Canello sketched two different kinds of narrative plots. The former, leading to an happy ending, is involving a young lady and a young man that usually go through all the natural barriers, the cultural stakes and the social obstacles before earning the legal and righteous validation of their «natural ambition» to marriage and breeding. The latter tells the story of a badly assorted couple, in terms of age or social difference, their relationship typically being ruined by an affair with a third person, better matching the needs of the male or the female individual of the married couple. Adopting an ecological approach to ethics and aesthetic, Canello rejects the typical account defining as moral and good just the first kind of plots. Rather, he considers both as samples of right and wrong partnerships, aimed to show, warn, eventually rectify the sexual choice and, as an outcome, the sexual selection.

Last but not least, Canello assessed the authorial awareness as a totally unnecessary asset. Even if the authors of the novels, the epics, the plays are just aimed to please by their works, or to show how life is, just doing it they indirectly (pleasing) or directly (describing) show how the sexual selection works or should work. So, according to Canello's the arts are involved in the evolutionary process, suggesting the individual behaviors that ease the choice of the better partner. Indeed, Canello gave a terrific clue, assuming that the *Homo Sapiens-Sapiens* is «per eccellenza un animale imitativo», a sort of 'mimetic mammal'. In sum, Canello stated that literature, as the visual arts and every other symbolic activity, could eventually benchmark the male and female prototype of reproductive success. In his view, imitation, a key-feature of human nature, acts as a major player into the evolutionary process well known as the sexual selection. Indeed, Canello circumscribed the «usefulness» of the literature to sexual selection, assessing poetry and narratives as devices aimed to establish patterns of icon worshipping, so to stress and emphasize the selective advantages of some physical and cultural set of characters in the struggle for the reproduction.

Canello's approach, a good sample of how positivism could have applied to literatures regardless of History even in the 20th century, may somewhat match intuitions about an ecological theory of the novel. Indeed, the novel typically blends body-part related and general aspecific events, giving a deeper insight of character's peculiarities, his strengths, his flaws, the way he or she or it plans and performs throughout a whole story. Every single reader of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* knows the leading character of the novel much better than his own wife or partner. Likewise, hardly somebody knew his partner or husband better than Pierre, after reading Tolstoy's *Война и миръ* (*War and Peace*). The same can be said of every single protagonist of every single good novel. Narratives and other literary kinds as the experimental novels or the simply sloppy ones, that went all the way to extinction maybe failed to blend perception and action, emotion and evaluation so to establish patterns of icon worshipping as valuable and easy-to-grab as the ones provided by the novels that survived, bred and found spots into the 'shelves of fame' of literary canons.