Some new ways of thinking about some old ways of reading: transactional aesthetics, literature and the agon

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ABSTRACT

This article is meant as a useful classroom methodology by which teachers of literature may give their students a coherent rubric for understanding literary meaning and exegesis which can incorporate most literary theories while addressing the basic-to-advanced concepts required of literary students. Also, it will provide a working methodology for the inclusion of certain evolutionary aesthetic concerns as part of understanding literature. Mixing Dante’s ‘Four Levels’ with Rosenblatt’s idea of ‘transactional reading’ and Dissanayake’s four criteria for an evolutionary aesthetic model, this article yields a broad, powerful and common-sensical method of literary analysis by examining literature as a series of tensions (or what I will call ‘the agon’) between Dante’s schema, Rosenblatt’s efferent/aesthetic divide, between humans as natural and cultural beings, and the tension between literature’s textuality and its contextuality.

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To understand the basic psychological factors and to protect ourselves against the errors of false psychologies that play havoc with aesthetic philosophies, we recur to our basic principles: Experience is a matter of the interaction of the organism with its environment, an environment that is human as well as physical, that includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings. The organism brings with it through its own structure, native and acquired, forces that play a part in the interaction. The self acts as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend on the way the organism reacts and responds. There is no experience in which the human contribution is not a factor in determining what actually happens. The organism is a force, not a transparency. (Dewey, 1980, p. 256)

Introduction

The model proposed herein is intended as a common-sense approach for teaching literature in the classroom, primarily for college students, but also as an attempt to outline a methodology that operates between literary studies and evolutionary studies. It will, prima facie, disagree with much current literary practice, especially those theories strongly
allied with forms of linguistic relativism or constructivism (hereafter labeled Theory), though I would add that my proposed methodology is not wholly incompatible with them. I propose an easy to understand model with which to bring these systems together, using a variation of reader-response theory combined with the natural sciences to examine the framework of tensions by which literature operates, and to locate the human within the humanities. By human I mean a complex, symbol-wielding, highly evolved, self-conscious being who uses symbolic and abstract language. The human is, as Dewey says, ‘a force, not a transparency’, and literature functions as a series of tensions that operates by tensions. First, it will outline possible deficiencies in literary criticism. Then it will examine Dante’s literary levels, Louise Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic theory, then finish by connecting these to Ellen Dissanayake’s ideas of evolutionary aesthetics.

Science and aesthetics

I would like to start with an exploration of science and aesthetics that is compatible with both the disciplines of science and literature as a backdrop to show that they need not be seen as incompatible. To want a logic or rubric of literary methodology is to want some rational basis by which to apprehend meaning in and around the text, that is to say, echoing Dewey, the experience of an individual in an environment. Rosenblatt – a student of Dewey’s – says, ‘To affirm that the individual consciousness embodies forces that transcend the biological organism, that there is no sharp division between the subjective consciousness and its object does not require dispensing with the vital, dynamic, active empirical self’ (1994, p. 172). To argue that aesthetic objects (created by an individual) transcend the mere biological is perhaps true,1 but to transcend is to be part of a continuum, to have come from something or somewhere, being an originary part of the unified whole.2 Humans are never apart from our evolutionary history, despite our ability to identify it, and the denial of a common, universal ‘humanity’ in the Humanities (primarily as a function of the current practice of ‘Theory’)3 is baffling considering the very real and active discoveries going on in neuroscience, genetics and other fields. A leading critic in evolutionary aesthetics, Brian Boyd says:

If they had been less parochial, the literary scholars awed by Derrida’s assault on the whole edifice of Western thought would have seen beyond the provincialism of [his] claim [of the endless deferral of meaning] … They should have known that a century before Derrida, Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection – hardly an obscure corner of Western thought – had made anti-foundationalism almost an inevitable consequence. I say ‘parochial’ because Derrida and his disciples think only in terms of humans, of language, and of a small pantheon of French philosophers and approved forebears, especially the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. There was some excuse for Derrida in 1966, but there is none for the disciples in 2006, after decades of scientific work on infant and animal cognition. (2010, p. 200)

Some might argue that assaulting Derrida here is unfair, something of a ‘straw hominin’ [sic], but the ubiquity of his thought in literature departments (even as they deny his ideas) as well as that of Foucault who is more popular now (or Lacan who is entirely incompatible with any scientific reading) in literary departments is undeniable, let alone the presence of ‘the disciples’ at literary conventions and conferences.4

In practice and definition, art is notoriously slippery, and since bringing the natural sciences into aesthetic consideration would require objective criteria by which to assess
these inclusions, there might seem to be a core epistemic contradiction in methodology between the humanities and the social and natural sciences that would destroy the project internally before it ever got started. Nietzsche’s early anti-foundationalism and its influence notwithstanding, there is no other way to proceed for the sake of one’s students, let alone retaining one’s job in a department (where certain views are deemed heretical). Boyd notes:

> Until literature departments take into account that humans are not just cultural or textual phenomena but something more complex, English and related disciplines will continue to be the laughingstock of the academic world that they have been for years because of their obscurantist dogmatism and their coddled and preening pseudo-radicalism. (2010, p. 198)

So long as literature departments remain insulated from synthetic, interdepartmental, interdisciplinary methodology and practice, they will continue to be marginalized and trimmed by the ever-expanding corporate-model administrative policies that tend to regard the humanities as extraneous appendages instead of the very core of what a college education should instill in young adults. Esoteric baubles from the Theory camps will only aid this trend. What is needed is a return to rationality, attention to form – and even to science – as well as retaining the best aspects of Theory – attention to language, issues of power – such that we are not lulled back to complacence by the pedantry of our pedagogy. Where might this return to the rational begin?

Margolis says in regard to rationality – toward a beginning conception of it – that the ‘required conception of rationality, then, must situate us between the extremes of metaphysical realism and mere skepticism … (T)here is only one – extremely persuasive – option before us: some version of Charles Sander’s Peirce’s biologically motivated view of human rationality’ (1988, p. 101). What I propose – a literary reading method that allows for interpretive range and inclusion of natural science – requires that we allow certain (metaphysically) realist properties in the door (evolution and sexual selection effect our actions to some degree and this effect can be seen in the cause/effect of artistic representation). This must be put into concert with certain skeptical attitudes (as in regard to literature, we can never be certain that X, Y or Z are the ‘correct’ interpretations). One reason for bringing Peirce into this discussion is that the literary debate has grown stale and fractious, hampering the importance of the humanities where most critical dialogue now is criticism that discusses criticism. Our discussions of artistic practice require a new infusion. Dissanayake says that

> if we view art not as an accidental by-product of big brains but as the active human capacity and motivation to elaborate and respond to elaborations, we can go beyond the simplistic assumption that ‘aesthetic’ evaluations are nothing more than enticements of our adaptive interests. (2000, pp. 207–208)

Far from reducing art to an evolved reflex, Dissanayake seeks an integrative philosophy of literature that allows aesthetics and evolution to coexist in a new way.

Susan Haack agrees, saying,

> We humans are not the only animals to explore the world around us; but the human capacity for representation, for language and other symbol-systems, enables us not only to explore but to inquire … [and] without the distinctive human capacity for inquiry and articulation, culture as we know it could hardly be possible. (2013, p. 23)
Haack’s (2009) philosophy of science takes much from Peirce, and seeks a middle ground to the debate between science and the Human (and see also her book Evidence and Inquiry 2009). This is because Peirce pushed his philosophy as a method for connecting associative events, piecing them together and forming a sense of continuity rather than by disassociative counter-position. An evolutionary aesthetic principle would not (or could not) follow a principle of necessity, here to mean a purely non-contingent principle. As evolution itself is contingent (mutation and behaviors operating in an environment), so too are aesthetic units contingent, as well as literary works and meaning. Few if any evolutionary aestheticians would call for a principally reductive literary theory. Peirce says:

That single events should be hard and unintelligible, logic will permit without difficulty: we do not expect to make the shock of a personally experienced earthquake appear natural and reasonable by any amount of cogitation. But logic does expect things general to be understandable. To say that there is a universal law, and that it is a hard, ultimate, unintelligible fact, the why and wherefore of which can never be inquired into, at this a sound a logic will revolt, and will pass over at once to a method of philosophizing which does not thus barricade the road of discovery. (1974, Vol. 6, p. 60)

Facts about the world and our ability to generalize those facts into categories of thought helps to dissolve the Cartesian mind/body problem. It is a physical fact that the human body and brain evolved. The mind is an emergent property of the brain. They are not separate, just as the human mind, Peirce notes, is capable of registering physical and abstract general categories about the world. Yet this kind of Cartesian split still seems to dominate much of Theory’s aims: that humans are products of mind (language, words and culture) and not of the body (genetics, biology and evolution). If evolution is a universal law by which all species on this planet came to be, then how could it be that we would not find it evinced in the very enterprises that make us the most human, reflect our humanity the most, and have long been regarded as the repository of a shared human experience: our language and our art? Wilson says:

We are a very special species, perhaps the chosen species if you prefer, but the humanities by themselves cannot explain why this is the case. They don’t even pose the question in a manner that can be answered … [They] do not address the origins of the traits we fundamentally possess – our overbearing instincts, our moderate intelligence, our dangerously limited wisdom, even, critics will insist, the hubris of our science. (2014, p. 51)

The notion is quite simple: if evolution is a fact, then human beings evolved and thus, as with any other animal species, certain predilections, traits and behaviors will be present in how humans interact with one another, behave, reproduce and interact with their environment. Certain traits will find themselves represented in art, given its universal occurrence in all recorded cultures. This is not an argument about High or Low Art. It is a simple fact about art’s universality, and about our species’ evolutionary directions. If we pursue Theory’s aim to its logical conclusion, then there should be some culture out there that does not in some way participate aesthetically, as the kind of proscribed social constructivism in practice should have produced some culture which did not especially prize forms of artistic representation, modification or accommodation. There is not. Ellen Dissanayake, another influential critic in evolutionary aesthetics says, ‘If it is recognized that the arts everywhere address the same human concerns that have been part of the human condition for millennia, then we have a means of bringing people together rather than
dividing them’ (2000, p. 203). Just as phenotypic regularity is undergirded by genotypic stability with moderate variation,\(^7\) so too is the ubiquity and function of art belied by a common evolved character inherent and endemic to our species that manifests itself broadly in what we call culture. Is this stance scientistic, saying that everything can be reduced rigidly to science? Not at all. It is merely a call to be honest and forthright. To reduce all textual symbolic value in a book to some evolved trait is as strange a notion as saying that the human genome is a purely linguistic creation. Both views from literature and science have their merits and we should combine them to create new modes and methods of inquiry. As Peirce says (at length):

For although there is as much reason to believe in the unity of origin of humankind as there is in that of the dogs, the parrots, or the finches …, yet the extraordinary variety of languages, customs, institutions, religions, as well as the many revolutions [these] have undergone in the brief half-dozen of millennia to which our acquaintance with them is as yet limited, as compared with the almost insignificant anatomical variations, – these facts, I say, make the old-fashioned notion that because there is no immediate appeal from instinctive ratiocinative conviction that there can therefore be no improvement or growth in fundamental ratiocinative procedure, appear to moderns a good deal in the attitude of a schoolboy perched on a stool with a fool’s cap on his head. (1992, Vol. 2, p. 468)

For Peirce, as evolved biological entities, we are part of this world, equipped with a (relatively) stable intelligence that is capable of making correct and incorrect propositions about the things around and inside us. How could we not? Our species is still here 150k years on.\(^8\)

A ‘scientific reading’ of literature\(^9\) will, however, only sit atop the surface of the text like a water-strider, like any other plausible interpretation. At best, a purely evolutionary account of literary works will grant not much more than the fact that human beings have a tendency to enjoy art or storytelling or symbolic exchange. The questions remain: how to integrate the contingent cultural vocabulary of literary criticism, and how to make this amenable for a working classroom model. As opposed to a purely evolutionary model, a purely linguistic theory of literature patently ignores the fact that we are an animal species, and that if we can observe traits and behaviors in other animals, it necessarily follows that we too must exhibit traits and tendencies which demonstrate to some degree our evolutionary background. Neither side must be given total supremacy, especially in a literary work which is itself repository of individual desires – be they idiosyncratic and/or natural – placed into a rich linguistic milieu of culture, history and contingency. It is a balancing act between the general and specific aspects of science and culture as inextricably bound together. As the Peirce scholar Frederik Stjernfelt says:

The implication [of a non-Peircean line of thought] is that on one hand, we get a kind of emaciated natural world consisting of isolated particulars only, bereft of any kind of generality. On the other hand, in the very same universe, one particular, strange kind of object is supposed to stand out – the mind – which alone has the ability to create general objects and syntheses, namely those labels assumed identical from one to the next … Philosophers may be satisfied with bracketing that psyche … but that only leaves the road open for exactly psychologism, the tendency to locate ontological and logical structure in the mind of the beholder and take psychology to be the science studying them. So nominalism and psychologism often, if not always, go together. Peirce refused both – with the upshot that his naturalism automatically includes thought, logic, semiotics, and mind in intrinsic aspects. (2014, p. 107)
What is clear in this passage is that Theory’s branding of the individual mind as sole arbiter and sole property – following a vaguely Cartesian stamp – disallows the ability to incorporate the findings of the natural sciences into something like literary studies. While the language may be slightly obtuse for common classroom goals, the implications are clear: psychologism (moderate to extreme forms of subjectivity) and nominalism (that generals or universals are merely names without any reality) is roundly rejected by Peirce. Thus by his formulations may we come to a definition of science that is not question begging, borderline radically skeptical, or able to deny the generality of natural selection and the universality of certain human traits. This last part is crucial for any literary theory desiring to incorporate the natural into the debate. Then, what form might a hybrid theory like this take? We turn seven centuries back to Dante Alighieri for the first step in assembling our new Frankenstein.

**Dante, aesthetic/efferent transaction and evolutionary aesthetic criteria**

In a letter to his patron Can Grande della Scala, Dante Alighieri (1891)\(^\text{10}\) establishes a four-fold method of writing and reading which seeks to tie authorial intention to the interests of literature and to moral and spiritual concerns. With a little modification, this rubric may be modified to fit the modern classroom, keeping the textual and the contextual firmly in view. This four-level approach is well known and has its beginning in medieval literary tropes, extending back to the sixth century. Turning to Dante as a model for literary interpretation is not to suggest that we also adopt medieval belief or practice. One advantage is that (with modification) it is free of modern association in regard to current literary theories. New Historicism, Humanistic Criticism and Ethical Criticism (to name a few theoretical approaches most sympathetic) all find place within Dante’s schema, as will be shown. It could also be said that any theoretical approach could be used here ‘with modification’, and if true, why not try something new. If nothing else, the use of Dante’s Four Levels is novel in application, is flexible enough (with the right bending) to allow the natural sciences into the discussion (which New Criticism and Humanistic Criticism cannot alone), and creates a very clear distinction between text and context which fits nicely with Rosenblatt’s notion of efferent and aesthetic reading and writing.

To parse Dante a bit quickly, the breakdown of the levels goes as follows: Literal, Typological, Tropological and Anagogical. The literal level is simply the textual material present, the subjects, ideas, characters, etc. The typological relates to the sense of allegorical readings possible in the text (the literary stuff). The tropological would be the moral sense of the text, what the text demonstrates in relation to the spiritual community. The anagogical level refers the reader to the spiritual, the teleological end of the text in its relation to God and to eschatos, the End in the Christian apocalyptic belief.

To modify this for the modern, secular classroom\(^\text{11}\) some changes can handily be made. The literal here would address such things as setting, character, plot, etc. The typological level would be the heart of most introductory literature courses, outlining the use of figurative language or literary references in the text and their relation to the theme. Any figurative use of language as well as references to other texts would fit into the typological.\(^\text{12}\) A theory close to New Criticism exemplifies the close scrutiny required at this level, as well as the ever-widening reading repertoire that is expected of literature students,\(^\text{13}\) though New Criticism’s focus solely on the ‘text’ would require...
modification to fit with evolutionary aesthetic models. The tropological and anagogical require slightly more explanation.

A tropological reading for the modern classroom requires a sense of historical context, or a sense of what the text’s interaction is with what the prevailing moral and ethical community might be. Sometimes this will be known – will be clearly enunciated in the text – and at other times it may be hard to discern, depending on the kind of story being told. The text may offer up clues or direct statements at this level in the form of exposition. Extratextual concerns such as this allow for political, literary and socio-economic factors/theories to enter into the literary debate without making them the primary methods of rendering meaning. This is especially important to give students a range of interpretational strategies rather than render every text a ‘product of discursive power dynamics’. While these kinds of factors certainly play their part in the production of a literary work, the abstraction away from human intentionality into vague realms of ‘power’ or ‘text’ remove human agency and, I would argue, human dignity (see below). It limits the multiplicity of readings instead of compounding possible uberty of the textual. Contention aside, it is into the tropological level that many current literary theories fit best, especially those that are politically driven or aligned with the social sciences (such as humanistic, cosmopolitan, ethical, feminist and queer theories, as well as some versions of post-structuralist thought).

The fourth level or category, the anagogical, requires the most modification. Here, we should not (necessarily) focus on the text’s interaction with the spiritual but rather its interaction with the human. That is to say, its treatment of human dignity in relation to its tropological stance. It is at its core a humanistic endeavor. It seeks to place the individual’s concerns (here as a conscious, rational being that is partly driven by natural and sexual selection pressures as well as cultural influences in addition to individual desires and preferences, all as evinced in language/symbolic exchange). How does the text raise or obscure the characters’ dignity, or, how does it interact with the characters at a level that the reader can sense or feel either empathy or sympathy? Note here the strong similarity to ethical critical theory with the primary distinction being that ethical theory cannot give adequate account as to why humans act in certain ways, opting instead to describe how we do. Incorporating evolutionary theory here helps to understand ourselves as an animal species and as a rather special set of individuals living in relation to other individuals in a social, natural and symbolic setting. We are evolved animals and yet conscious of being so, quite a unique place in the biosphere, let alone the universe. Language (or, more broadly, symbolic exchange) constructs some of who we are, and yet our very ability to use and manipulate these symbols is a result of our evolutionary heritage. A tight circle, but not a terribly vicious one. To focus only on one side of this is to ignore what it means, at the very core, to be human and thus, to my thinking, degrades the sense of human dignity away from something shared and given by our species to one another. While this may sound airy, I can find no better way to address the sense of continuum that aesthetic objects yield when viewed in this way. Every (good) literary text deals with the anagogical at this level: the line and tension between our sense of self, as a product of the natural and the cultural, and how meaning is made of that tension when it is given or taken away by a particular author for dramatic or intentional effect. When we speak of altruism, for example, we are dealing with
something very much a part of our evolutionary past bearing down on the sense of self in the present. Human altruism is not fundamentally a social phenomenon in the same sense as currency exchange value or fashion trends or the role of literature in the classroom. It is as central to our species as our need for culture, for love, sociability, symbolic interaction in language and in art. Dignity in this sense, as the fundament of art in the analogical mode, remains central to the project of artistic production and meaning. But Dante alone is just the first step in assembling this hybrid method of reading and interpreting. What is needed is a further distinction between types of language used in literature and the everyday.

Frankenstein, assemble thyself

Rosenblatt’s notion of Transactional Reading dates back to 1938 and stems from her prolonged engagement with the work of Dewey. It is also considered the first ‘reader-response’ theory though it bears little resemblance to the modern iterations carrying the same name. Rosenblatt discusses the aesthetic stance and the efferent stance as key to understanding the transactional nature of literary understanding. In the efferent stance, ‘the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out’ (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 23). In the aesthetic stance, by contrast, ‘the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text’ (1994, p. 25). They are both time sensitive endeavors, one requiring retention of data while the other requires attention to the experience of interactive reading in a literary text. Rosenblatt does not want to create an artificial hierarchy between high and low literature, or between learned and lay readers (1994, p. 141). Her system is fundamentally democratic, but it is willing to admit that someone who has spent more time with a text may well have a stronger understanding of it through repeated readings and reflection. She clearly does not intend to exclude anyone from interpreting a text; she stresses that everyone interprets on various levels and to differing levels of intensity. She says that

the transactional approach does not permit honorific use of the terms ‘literary work of art’ or ‘literature’… The transactional view accepts into the aesthetic realm all readings in which the reader attends to the lived-through experience engendered by the text. (1994, p. 155)

If the transaction here is temporally locatable, then it is contingent but not relativized linguistically or culturally. It is bound in an individual who is identifiable in a language group and culture with certain prejudices inherent to that culture and language (say, Author X is second rate compared to Author Y; or My poem can beat up your poem), and this individual is also subject to certain qualities common to our species which must be understood and applied in a broadly statistical way.

To make this last point clear, any traits that are hereditary are going to show variation in the sample group. This is why the enterprise of evolutionary aesthetics must remain fallible and must be constantly proofed. As Rosenblatt says,

From [developing the individual’s capacity to adopt the aesthetic stance] would flow, also, a humanistic concern for the relation of the individual literary event to the continuing life of the reader in all its facets – aesthetic, moral, economic, or social. (1994, p. 161)
Or, I would add, the evolutionary. To combine Dante and Rosenblatt gives us a system by which to classify and read literary events. The four-level system may be further subdivided into an efferent and aesthetic category. Thus we have: Literal Efferent and Literal Aesthetic, Typological Efferent and Typological Aesthetic, Tropological Efferent and Tropological Aesthetic, Anagogical Efferent and Anagogical Aesthetic. These break along textual and contextual lines forming an ‘agon’ or tension at each intersection. There is an agon between the text and context, the literal efferent and literal aesthetic, the anagogical efferent and the anagogical aesthetic, etc. The Taxonomy looks like this:

**Text:**

1) **Literal Efferent:** Survey of characters, plots, dates, settings, narrative structure, etc.
   - That a character develops. That a story exhibits certain narrative devices (analepsis, parallel structure, etc.) For example, when was a text written, by whom, where? Think of this as potentially multiple choice questions/answers.

2) **Literal Aesthetic:** Survey of the dynamic nature of character, plot, narrative, etc. Why a character develops. How the narrative structure fits the setting, the psychology of the character, etc. What are the interrelations of the Literal Efferent instances in relation to the overall interpretation of the text? What effect does setting have on the actions of the character?

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3) **Typological Efferent:** Catalogue of symbolic values, figurative language, allegorical analogue, metaphors and tropes. What are the definitions and allusions, to whom were/are they important, etc.

4) **Typological Aesthetic:** How these moments of figurative language combine to deepen the value of the text as a semiotic exchange. What is the interrelation of these moments of figurative/symbolic meaning to the text? What are the ironies employed by the author?

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5) **Tropological Efferent:** What are the prevailing moral systems inherent in the book, and in its historical context. Adjusting for this allows historicist criticism to remain intact as a critical tool.

6) **Tropological Aesthetic:** Textual representation of social interaction. Ritual, laws, taboos, etc. It helps us to distinguish between universal behaviors (those common to our species) and contingent behaviors (culturally bound, and it should be noted that most literary theories would operate at the tropological level). How are any ironies used to contravene existing cultural or ethical concerns regarding the characters, setting or historical context of the work?

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7) **Anagogical Efferent:** Natural signs, inclinations, traits and behaviors. These are instances of the common human traits shared by our species.
8) **Anagogical Aesthetic:** The attainment/suspension of dignity (and altruism/empathy) as a human being in the textual character. Here, the evolved aspect of our species intertwines with the social demarcation of status, of artistic creation, of dignity. What ironies is the author using to delve into complex ambiguities about individuals or human nature?

What emerges from this diagramming is a series of agons\(^{23}\) (tensions). Some texts put incredible pressure on their symbolic vehicles, others on their plain-forward style, while others are pure allegory and satire and others still go far into the absurd and abstract. Each of these, according to the outlined taxonomy, is accorded its weight and measure. One cannot put all the interpretive weight on a text’s use of the absurd (think, Don Barthelme, for example, whom I will use later as example) without noticing the particular relation to other textual and extratextual factors, as in, what about the prevailing cultural/political milieu in which the text was written may account for the use of absurdity in the author/text. Similarly, certain texts will yield their tensions between the Anagogical Efferent and Typological Efferent/Aesthetic, or in any combination that the students find in and out of the text. For the classroom, this makes reading literature much more dynamic and requires more critical thinking (and research and secondary sources) from students to press past efferent readings (namely close reading) into the aesthetic, but it is also straightforward and easy to follow.

The next step, to integrate an evolutionary aesthetic model into this system, is to see what criteria are assimilable into the model and whether they are uniformly compatible. For this, we return to Dissanayake. She lays out four criteria for establishing a naturalistic aesthetics which fit quite nicely into the above rubric. Her four criteria are accessibility coupled with strikingness, tangible relevance, evocative resonance and satisfying fullness (2000, pp. 214–217).\(^{24}\) Should we flip around Dissanayake’s second and third criteria here, they align with the Rosenblatt/Dante model and undergird either the efferent or the aesthetic stances for each of the literal, typological, tropological or anagogical levels. ‘Accessibility’ is nothing less than being able to read the literal text, to understand what is going on. That this should be ‘striking’ in a literary work, for example, plays well into the aesthetic stance in that literary works are meant to be read as something special, something apart from a grocery list\(^{25}\) or the results of a sporting event. ‘Evocative resonance’ is what the work appears to do from its aesthetic stance and how other members of that group may understand and interpret it thereby from their particular aesthetic stances. Here, we see Rosenblatt’s democratic\(^{26}\) leanings buttress Dissanayake’s evolutionary concerns. It is not a relativistic enterprise but a communal one based on the definitions and symbolic gestures inherent to a particular art form. What makes a sonnet a sonnet, for example, or, how is poet X using the line to interrupt the breath rhythm in a poem, etc. ‘Tangible relevance’ operates at the efferent level which the reader then parlays into their particular lifeway, both biological and cultural, through aesthetic meaning. Here social relevance would necessarily factor in (and thus my inclusion here of Theory so long as it is not seen as totalizing, which, by the four-fold structure of this model, it cannot be). The final criterion, ‘satisfying fullness’, does evoke – in Dissanayake’s passage in endnote xxiii – a striking similarity to that notion of human dignity as something memorable, transfiguring, evocative and transcendent. This is Art: that strange fascination and fixation with aesthetic objects which moves us, brings us back to a poem, a story, a method by which to
understand ourselves as human and to try and find meaning amid the wash of cosmic irony and to fend off – as much as we should admit it – the mere stamp of our evolutionary heritage.

Looking at Donald Barthelme’s classic story, ‘The School’, we can demonstrate each particular agon that shows up in the text (and as I noted, certain stories will put more or less of their weight on particular combinations of these, omitting things like specific setting or particular character motivation in order to heighten certain tensions/agon). ‘The School’ is a short story that refuses – self-consciously – to resolve itself in a traditional plot arc. Each particular plot detail is quickly discarded to compound traditional storytelling tropes and to create an exponential urgency in the story. We see a narrator, Edgar, presumably a teacher, discussing the events at his school. The first two of four pages detail a series of trees, fish, gerbils, dogs and eventually children and other people who die, seemingly without reason. The narrator is questioned by his students, Why all this death, to which he has no real response except to further deflect and change the subject. It is an absurdist story, partially grounded in the very human need for closure after death (tension between the anagogical efferent and anagogical aesthetic) which is then held in tension with the humorous quality of the story itself (literal aesthetic).

It also has immense tension between the typological efferent and the tropological efferent: the various pets’ and animals’ death seem to be the death of childhood innocence (symbols: typological aesthetic), that moment of realization and entrance into the adult world of self-conscious mortality (anagogical aesthetic), but the book offers no moralizing on the subject (tropological aesthetic), subsuming this ritualized entrance in avoidance (creating a severe agon between the competing elements). This might reflect the author’s or culture’s attitude toward the Vietnam War (the story was published in 1974), or, from a tropological aesthetic point of view, the culture’s attitude toward war in general. The tonal swerve (typological efferent) when the Korean orphan dies (the first but not last human casualty), and the children’s darkly comic approximation of philosophical ‘death talk’ (agon between typological efferent and tropological aesthetic) that follows a passage which is the most clearly sincere and direct address in the story:

One day, we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? and I said, I don’t know, I don’t know. And they said, who knows? and I said, nobody knows. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? And I said, no, life is that which gives meaning to life. Then they said, but isn’t death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of-

I said, yes, maybe.

They said, we don’t like it. (2003, p. 306)

There is a moment here of attempting (as most literature does) dignity or meaning in death, which the author quickly dodges. To come back to the notion of dignity (the anagogical aesthetic) I mentioned earlier, where would one find dignity in a story that evades the augmented rhetoric that it drums up in answer to its own questions? The lack of resolution or dignity here is exactly its instance. The end of the story – when we would expect closure or release – offers none. Just after kissing the teaching assistant (who suddenly
appears after the children want to see how love-making is done), Barthelme writes, ‘The
children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, and the new gerbil walked
in. The children cheered wildly’ (2003, p. 307).

The tension in the closing of the story is, as any literary work should be, open to
interpretation: either the children have learned the lesson imparted by their ‘teacher’ to
evade all serious talk (sex, death and responsibility) and cheer whatever happens by
(anthropomorphic rodent), or they have fully embraced a sort of Camus-like Sisyphean
existential attitude that life is the meaning of life, and their cheers are not of avoidance
but of acceptance and affirmation. As can be seen here, tension in a story may also be
between the same category, hence allowing literary texts to maintain their ambiguity
and irony (key to literature) while having a method to discuss them as relational elements.
The story also fulfills Dissanayake’s criteria: accessibility coupled with strikingness, tangible
relevance, evocative resonance and satisfying fullness. The fullness evoked is the tension
inherent in the anagogical aesthetic, the story’s unwillingness to sew shut its many fis-
sures. This represents the barest interaction of agons in Barthelme’s story, but these inter-
actions hopefully demonstrate how easily discussion can be made using this rubric.

As a simple guideline for students, the challenge of literary definition is thus: Can the
ascribed literary work check off the boxes of the four levels, and where do evolutionary con-
cerns enter in and are they efferent or aesthetic? What might seem simple at first becomes
something of a positive challenge for students of literature. Can *Harry Potter* be a work
of literature? From an aesthetic stance, seeing the work in the category of Children’s/YA Lit,
yes. Can *Twilight*? No. This may also help to outline what we may call serious and
popular literary maneuvers. This is not to denigrate forms of art that seek to entertain
or shock or offend as their purposive ends, but we should be attentive to the analogical
end of these kinds of works. If they do not interplay at the level of human dignity from
the aesthetic stance, then they are entertainment. Again, this is a classification, not a judg-
ment. *Twilight* is a popular literary maneuver. *Harry Potter* is a more serious literary maneu-
ver. Each has made their respective authors very rich. However, it is easily noted that one
of these series is simply more aesthetically oriented, deals with broader issues, has deeper
concerns, pushes down into the tropological and anagogical levels more openly – into con-
cerns of good versus evil and the very issue of human dignity. (And here I mean *Harry Potter.*)
*Twilight* involves, for example, the frequent taking off of shirts. If we re-categorize this shirt
removal as a type of sexual display behavior on the part of males, there can be a type of
anagogical efferent reading, though my guess is that extension into an anagogical aesthetic
level would yield very little except for ‘audience appeal’, relegating it back to typological
efferent at best. No matter. Each story and action and component has a particular category
by which to understand it. Neither is ‘better’, just that one may be read more deeply and the
student or individual reading them may find more to gain at a personal level rather than just
the – quite necessary – entertainment level.

**Conclusion**

I freely admit that attempts to read the natural sciences in literature are difficult. This is not
to say that the endeavor is impossible. What has always bothered me in my attempts – and
the attempts of others – is the methodology by which this may be done. It would seem
very strange to accept the principle of evolution as a force which has shaped every
species on this planet, including ours, and then deny that it plays any part in artistic and symbolic representation, a most common and most unique aspect of our species. Rosenblatt's balancing act between the efferent/aesthetic divide, along with a healthy dose of common sense, and categorization along the literal/typological/tropological/anagogical lines in concert with Dissanayake's work helps to give a kind of organization for classroom use, as well as for research endeavors. This framework can easily be added to regarding poetry and other genres, and may be modified to fit other literary (even contrary) literary theories. It will hopefully give students a clear categorical distinction and vocabulary to use for classroom discussion.

Notes

1. I am admittedly divided on this issue. If our aesthetic tastes were formed in our Pleistocene past then the general regularity of common artistic practice should be enough (spread cross-culturally, for example, art of some form exists in all human culture) to dispel a notion of 'the transcendental' function of artistic practice, though it is perhaps the term itself and its quasi-mystic association that I have trouble with. We cannot hope to jettison all vocabulary simply because prior definitions do not square with current methodological practice and understanding. I leave 'transcend' here to mean rising above X, but not wholly apart from X.

2. Here I am certainly not calling for any brand of essentialism: that there exists some overarching grand Map or Key to literature. Thought scientists will tend to talk about unifying this or that theory into a Master Theory, capable of explaining everything, it is simply not ever going to happen. There is no reason, seeing natural science as a fallible (when done correctly) enterprise, that it should be incompatible with literature.

3. My main issue with much of the Humanities’ focus on forms of linguistic relativism, constructivism and idealism is that labeling the ‘self’ as something ever plastic, ever redefining its boundaries, must, as a logical consequence, also dispense with the idea of a common human nature. Hence, it must dispense with scientific facts. I have no problem with the general aim of most Theory: To create a discourse in which we can uphold human dignity, extend the rights of all individuals and groups, and generally try to make the world a more humane and less cruel place. My issue with Theory is that it has increasingly lost contact with practically applicable issues, especially in literary studies. My article is not meant as a polemic against this or that Theory, but rather seeks to provide a kind of inclusive working methodology.

4. Derrida is often cited in the evolutionary aesthetic literature as an example of ‘anti-science’. I think the characterization to be somewhat unfair specifically, but generally allowable. Derrida’s claim that there is ‘nothing outside the text’ is often interpreted as meaning that everything (human beings, the universe, words, science, texts themselves, consciousness, hamburgers) is textual in nature because a text requires an intervening language (further text) in order to discuss the text, hence definition and meaning are both endlessly deferred if not outright pointless to seek because the idea becomes so recursive that it is not able to classify itself except as another type of classificatory scheme. If we take Derrida (or his disciples to this day) as meaning that language does get in the way of absolute notions of ‘Truth’ and that defining things can be difficult, then I see no problem with his declaration except that it then becomes a largely banal point that goes back at least to Plato, and is something that any poet or writer tends to lean heavily on. To be fair, the French philosophic tradition often has authors make similar outrageous proclamations and then walk them back toward a less radical position. My argument here is not against Derrida. It is for an entirely different style of reading.

5. And Derrida and Foucault by proxy and all their followers/disciples. I realize that I am rather lumping together potentially disparate groups, but I cannot hope to argue this point in a single article. It shall suffice that the residual hostility to the findings of the natural sciences (per postmodernism/post-structuralism and their variants) as something irreducibly linguistic – thus providing no ‘facts’ – justify their inclusion together here.
6. Wilson says later,

Cultural evolution is different [than organic evolution] because it is entirely a product of the human brain, an organ that evolved during prehumen and Paleolithic times through a very special form of natural selection called gene-culture coevolution (where genetic evolution and cultural evolution each affect the trajectory of the other). The brain’s unique capability, lodged primarily in the memory banks of the frontal cortex, arose from the tenure of Homo Habilis two million to three million years ago until the global spread of its descendant Homo sapiens sixty thousand years ago. (2014, p. 56)

7. ‘If, say, the intricate mechanism of a hawk’s eye had to be exactly specified by genes, any mutation or early lack of nutrients, however small, could throw the whole thing out of alignment and it would be useless’ (Turner 1995, p. 110). The phenotype is remarkably stable and though some epigenetic influences may alter the genetic code, it does little to radically alter phenotypic regularity.

8. This number is course subject to fallible revision.

9. Here I would cite any number of recommended readings in the vein of evolutionary aesthetics. See Cooke and Turner (1999), Dutton (2006), UttonGottshall (2008), Boyd (2010), Carroll (2012), Dissanayake (2000), Collins (2013) and Wheeler (2006), to name a few. These authors (for the most part) are not confrontational in their efforts to bring natural science and literature closer together, and I find their various methodologies to be fair and generous in scope, attitude and mien. All admit to linguistic and symbolic variance as necessary in aesthetic attitude, while adding to this the biology and evolved character of our species.

10. This was a common medieval conceit as well, but I defer to Dante because it is a name – for classroom use – that students have at least heard.

11. In relation to fiction only for the purposes of this paper, but the same basic principles would apply in fields like poetry. I simply do not have the space here to outline this, but it would follow very similar lines.

12. Basically, much of something like New Criticism fits very nicely into the typological for its range of textual analytic tools and definitions. New Criticism is flawed in its sole focus on the text. Its technique of ‘close reading’ needs only small modification to fit my model as it gives students a wide range of vocabulary and analytical tools.

13. Too often, in my experience, students have read far too much ‘Theory’ and understand source texts only through that particular lens, often having only read source texts through a particular theorist’s view. By ‘Theory’ is meant any form of literary analysis that fails to distinguish source texts from those texts that analyze sources. As much French/Continental theory would have the theory texts themselves demarcate each iterative text as ‘literary’. Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic distinction makes the divide between these very clear. For a novel application of Peirce to literature (without the natural sciences), see Sheriff (1989, pp. 91–121). While Sheriff does use Peirce’s specific semiotic vocabulary (which is tricky at first), the book is quite clear and sound in its methods and makes an excellent teachable introduction to Peirce’s thought as applied to literary works and in opposition to much of the prevailing post-modern and post-structuralist theories.

14. If we read dignity as the capacity and recognition of worth in others per evolved social emotions (namely one cannot confer dignity on oneself), then it is clear that purely textual readings of literature would be incompatible, and discussions of ‘power discourse’ are wholly incapable of admitting that this notion derives itself from evolved tendencies in our species, instead allowing it an ethereal and sweeping universality without ever giving any explanation where it comes from.

15. I would link my definition of dignity here with a kind of Aristotelean eudaimonia. Though this is often rendered ‘happiness’ its closer definition is a kind of ‘flourishing’. Most likely (in my opinion), dignity is a social status equalizer that is socially conferred as a byproduct of altruistic tendencies in our species which originally arose as more simple (though no less important) empathic tendencies. Many animals – from elephants to whales to apes to humans – are
capable of empathy (see de Waal 2010, pp. 118–157), and others are capable of altruistic behavior (see Wilson, 2015) such as some vertebrates and eusocial insects. In relation to dignity, I see it as deriving from the human symbolic/language impulse based on our intense sociality. Here, it should be noted that Ethical Criticism fits very nicely (as it would seek to explain morality in literature as a reflection of our imitative and influenced selves), except that it can give no account of why humans are so mimetic and why we tend to be altruistic and empathetic. Evolutionary science is needed to answer these queries, thus it should have a place in literary explication.

16. Stance here refers to Rosenblatt’s notion, discussed further on.
17. See Dreber, Rand, Fudenberg, and Nowak (2008), Nowak, Sasaki, Taylor, and Fudenberg (2004), Nowak and Sigmund (2005), Fudenberg, Rand, and Dreber (2012) and Nowak (2006).
18. Blending the tropological and anagogical into the literary removes artificial divides between culture/nature without giving primacy to either. When dealing with a literary text, we can thus assign certain actions the stamp of ‘trait’ or ‘behavior’ without fearing the retort that in a literary work all meaning is contingent since it is a falsifiable medium. We see Gilgamesh hold Enkidu and we feel a stirring in us because we have lost important people in our lives, because we are conscious of our biological death, because we are unable to fully grasp the concept at the intellectual or emotional or biological stratum, and because our extremely socially symbolic species has evolved to give meaning to our biological loss. We blandly say that elephants or chimpanzees ‘seem to mourn’ their dead, but that our elaborate rituals – simply due to what, their elaborations? – are somehow apart or different in kind from this continuum? (Indeed, look at how easily we anthropomorphize everything around us, how much we want our Neanderthal cousins to have ritualistically buried their dead just like us, and yet we deny that this impulse has anything do to with a shared evolutionary heritage. We are so fundamentally social and mimetic that we can barely see how the majority of our actions are dictated by this trait.) This strong cultural stance is thin on its face, and is banal at best in my view if that is all we have. It removes the human from the Humanities no less than a strong evolutionary psychological view (or an epiphenomenological stance) would remove agency from human action, handing the keys over to reproductive and survival tendencies in our Pleistocene past (or to our genes).

For our times disillusion with the idea of truth and the ideal of honest inquiry has become an almost orthodoxy; and we face a veritable barrage of arguments purporting to show that the concept of truth is redeemable and the supposed ideal of intellectual honesty is just another sham. (Haack 2013, p. 219)

The problem is that when one sees only politics or biology as driving the text, then the sense of the whole will be rendered only by its parts, as if we were to explain the circulation of the blood by examining a seeping headwound, or by the gauze we would use to staunch the flow. Of course literary texts are historically contingent, logically subtle, psychologically forceful, bound in paradox and ambiguity, and aesthetically playful. We are not reading finance spreadsheets or a department committee meeting’s minutes. Only a fully integrative literary reading can grant the text its broadest possible interpretation, its possible fullest meaning, rather than reductive and narrow fields of view. Literature must be understood as constituting both of these notions, the reductive and the emergent, the aesthetic and the efferent. By subdividing and adding through a combination of Dante, Rosenblatt and Dissanayake, we may come toward a novel literary understanding.

19. Rosenblatt does not restrict this idea to literary texts. Someone reading the warning label on a medicine bottle after an accidentally excessive ingestion would likely not ponder the ineffable quality of language’s troubled relationship to definitions that hearkens one back at least to Plato, etc. They will cut through to the efferent stance and see whether they require medical attention. Failure to do so would, from an evolutionary perspective, simply remove the aesthete’s genetic potential from the community, which is to say, remove that individual’s behavior (over-poeticization based on traits based on genes) from potential reproductive activity. Art for Art’s sake – or reliance on linguistic relativism – may be hazardous to one’s health.
20. Hence, not every student’s ‘interpretation’ is going to hold up under scrutiny. The same goes for educators. There has to be some balance there.

21. Fallibilism here (taken from Peirce) would simply mean that as scientific knowledge progresses through inductive analysis to hypothesis to testing to rejection or acceptance, it is constantly pruning and preening away those theories and notions that simply do not work. Literature departments are far more rigid and far less fallibilistic. We should certainly teach Freud or Marx in relation to literature because (for example) these two figures had vast influence on literary works and it will help students to place certain authors and literary maneuvers in historical context, but go to nearly any conference and you will hear Freudian interpretation (through the use of associated vocabulary) employed not in a historical fashion but in an active and very serious way (let alone Lacanian renderings). Fallibilism is a corrective ideology and should serve as the working hypothesis for literary exegesis as well.

22. The Greek word agon is clearly the etymological root for the English word agony, but its primary definition means ‘a meeting of people’, and the secondary definition means ‘tension, conflict or even danger’.

23. I am anglicizing the plural here.

24. Dissanayake says,

   In my naturalistic aesthetics scheme, considerations of aesthetic quality can apply at any of the first three levels, and the (generally rare) feeling of satisfying fullness will be inseparable from awareness of high quality. Judgments of adequacy, beauty, and interest will be almost automatic at the first level … [and at] the second level, also members of a culture will generally judge quickly how relevant the aesthetic work or occasion is to their particular tangible life concerns … [while] at the third level … assignments of quality will be most exacting and most dependent on variations among percipients, whose personal sensibilities and breadth or depth of knowledge will affect how much is brought to bear on experiencing the resonances that inhere in the aesthetic event … In most instances the quality of emotionally satisfying fullness does not inhere in a work’s contribution to immediate survival but is nevertheless profoundly memorable. As such, it has a kind of sufficiency that distinguishes it from the temporary thrills of pastimes and diversions … rather than replenished and transfigured, as happens with full aesthetics responses, which can last a lifetime. (2000, p. 217)

25. Such as the wonderful irony of Walter Miller’s grocery list in Canticle for Leibowitz that is taken as scripture.

26. An upshot of Rosenblatt’s transactional reading is that literary theory – because of its essential efferent stance – cannot be a work of literature per se. While this might be a contentious point, it is the logical conclusion to her idea. I would say that a literary theory must remain in the tropological efferent stance, while broader cultural or social practice (which theory elucidates) would sit at the tropological aesthetics level.

27. And forgive me for using these as examples, but their popularity seemed to offer the broadest possible example to the widest audience in contrast the relative obscurity of my scientific examples like Peirce.

28. Dissanayake says,

   It is then more than genre or style or creative intention that distinguishes a multimillion-dollar sex-and-violence blockbuster, advertising campaign, or best-selling suspense novel from the dark depths of the Beethoven opus 131 or the passionate intensity of The Brothers Karamazov … The latter works embody a degree of seriousness, commitment, resonance, and fullness that simply does not inhere in a slasher film, beer commercial, or page-turner, skillfully made (and interesting for social analysis) as it may be. (2000, p. 221)

   Who could disagree?

29. And countless authors, like me, jealous.
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