Evolution and Explanation: Biology, Aesthetics, Pragmatism

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Recent discussion of the arts has grown increasingly sympathetic to evolutionary psychology, a trend vividly captured in Denis Dutton’s recent book The Art Instinct. Yet evolutionary psychologists have paid startlingly little attention to pragmatism, despite the fact that pragmatists also work in Darwin’s wake and often interrogate the “two cultures” divide. An extended comparison of pragmatist and evolutionary aesthetics can help us recognize the more layered notion of “nature” running through pragmatism, and help us articulate what matters most for us in the understanding of literary and other aesthetic phenomena.

1. Just How Many Cultures Are There?

Near the start of Richard Powers’s 1995 novel Galatea 2.2, a cognitive scientist named Philip Lentz turns to a novelist trained in literary studies and poses a blunt question: “Tell us. What passes for knowledge in your so-called discipline?” Shortly afterward, the writer meets another, less confrontational scientist who seems to know an unusual amount of information about his life as a budding young author, prompting the novelist to ask: “Where the hell is the Two Cultures split when you need it?” In context, both questions are clearly meant as jokes. But they haunt the whole of Powers’s novel, which tracks Lentz’s self-described “reductionist” effort to prove that consciousness “is a deception,” “a glorified, fudged-up Turing machine.” And indeed, these questions about “so-called knowledge” and “the Two Cultures split” haunt not only Powers’s novel, but very broadly speaking much of the literature and criticism of the last two hundred years.

Poetry has of course always been contrasted with history and philosophy (think of Aristotle or Sidney), but with the rise of the natural sciences – the elimination of final causes, suspicion toward “first principles,” a general “disenchantment” of nature – poets have felt even more reason to be defensive. Beginning at least with the Romantics, writers and readers have expressed considerable anxiety about the perceived murder-to-dissect impulses of modernity, and have to one degree or another been willing to canonize
Dostoevsky, Eliot, Lawrence, and other later writers whom C. P. Snow called “natural luddites.”

Snow is of course the source for Powers’s phrase “the two cultures,” and his short 1959 book of that title wasn’t meant to flatter the literary side. For in calling modern writers “natural luddites,” he was accusing them of failing to appreciate the enormous technological advances of modernity, advances that had helped provide for the first time what he called the “primal things” to enormous populations: “years of life, freedom from hunger, survival for children” (TC 74). No doubt scientists are impoverished, said Snow, but literary intellectuals are impoverished in their own way, and “perhaps more seriously, because they are vainer about it,” imagining as they do that poetry, music, drama, and so forth constitute the whole of culture (TC 20). Such claims generated a hostile retort from literary scholars, most notably F. R. Leavis, but whatever its perceived flaws, Snow clearly crystallized tensions that extend well beyond the early years of the Cold War.

Indeed, in the decade and a half since Powers’s novel, Snow’s laments about the two cultures have been updated, and again not to the advantage of those who spend their lives thinking about literature and the arts. “A 1950s education in Freud, Marx, and modernism,” says the agent and editor John Brockman, “is not a sufficient qualification for a thinking person” today, yet “traditional American intellectuals are ... increasingly reactionary, and quite often proudly (and perversely) ignorant of many of the truly significant intellectual accomplishments of our time.” In a similar spirit, the biologist Steve Jones has remarked that “if you aren’t someone who can talk in general terms about scientific as well as nonscientific issues, you aren’t civilized,” and the theoretical physicist Lee Smolin has complained that literary intellectuals are “still caught in the trap of Nietzsche, playing with death and violence and negativity, playing out some old and obsolete notions of the world.”

But unlike Snow, these recent commentators have not only asked intellectuals to get “on speaking terms” (TC 67) with their scientific colleagues. They have also actively argued that the findings of cognitive science, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology can contribute significantly to – indeed, reshape – traditional literary and humanistic debates about meaning, interpretation, ethics, and politics. Such aspirations are often associated with what is called the “third culture” – to cite the title of the 1999 collection of essays that Brockman edited, and which includes essays not only by Smolin and Jones, but also by Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, and Daniel Dennett. And increasingly, this “third culture” has made inroads into the study of art and literature. As a growing number of conferences, websites, essays, and books attests, more and more scholars are being persuaded to discard the by-now heavy emphasis on the specificity of cultures, the variety of cultural practices, the historicity of cultural artifacts, the instability of our interpretations, and so on, and to direct their attention to the scientifically validated, evolutionarily developed universals of human nature that our art and literature express.