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The evolution of need

I work on literature and evolutionary psychology. Most people doing this kind of work, in Literary Darwinism or cognitive literary theory, think they can use the truths discovered by science as a regulatory canon for the interpretation of literature (which would make such interpretation considerably easier). The best known literary-Darwinists tend to maketheir arguments based on what they think the theory of evolution shows human interests *must* be. One could sum up such arguments via a mild conceptual pun: we readers are supposedly *interested* only in those things that are adapted to further our interests – where those interests are ultimately and fully defined as reproductive success. A few literary Darwinists (fewer than you'd think) will concede that there might be such things as what some biologists have called spandrels, interesting though not particularly adaptive byproducts of genuine adaptations. But if your criterion of truth is essentially whether the claim or proposition in question may be analyzed as describing a working part of a system or machine whose product is reproductive success, then literary theory and interpretation can either be true (to the extent that it corresponds to elements of our psychology evolved for their contribution to such a goal) or merely accidental and not amenable to discussion in any of the only arguments that (they say) ultimately matter, the only arguments (they say) that can have any meaning. Since it's unclear to the Literary Darwinists how, say, the hypersubtle, philosophically oriented accounts of literature that are so thrilling and feel so deep in French literary theory (and in many other theories of literature) could be relevant to reproductive success, they don't see how there could be any interest to such theories: except as a kind of bluffing declaration of status, a bluff which would be relevant to reproductive success, even as the ideas being bluffed about are irrelevant.

I start from the opposite perspective. If here I put together some ideas in evolutionary psychology with the literary thinking I find most powerful in the work of Maurice Blanchot, thinking to be found in some of his friends as well (from Levinas to Foucault, from Leiris and Caillois to Derrida to de Man) I do so to defend each of the two kinds of investigation from a too hasty dismissal by the partisans of the other side. (For me this entails correcting the manifest defects of vulgar Literary Darwinism, as it might called.)

A literary theory of need – and this I take it is one way to describe what Blanchot offers us --; a literary theory of need that thinks scientific thinking irrelevant cuts itself off from a source of great insight into the sources and manifestations of the human experience of need and of the world humans need and of the alternatives to that world we also need; and a theory of human psychology that can't account without being coarsely reductive for the literary experience offered by such writers as Blanchot is a theory of human

psychology that misses something extremely deep. And just to add one further clarification or signpost about my own approach, I'll say that my thinking about both Blanchot and evolutionary psychology finds analogues in the way I think about the philosophy (the later philosophy) of Wittgenstein, whose astonishing openmindedness would have been able to accommodate the insights of both, and see them as features of the same general investigation into human experience and action. (I say this just to try to show my perspective, but not in order to make that argument here.)

So let me start with a quotation from Blanchot's great fiction *L'arrêt de mort*. I am going to read it to you in English so as not to inflict my French pronunciation on you. Blanchot's narrator is describing the heroine of the first part of *L'arrêt de mort,* J. She is dying, and on the verge of death is struggling-- successfully – with and against a terrible solitude. At one point in the story, that feeling of solitude strikes her particularly strongly, and

> For a single minute, she struggled with all her strength, not with stratagems nor supplications, but inwardly, although refusing to admit it. Children are like that: they command the world silently, through the energy of a desperate avowal, and sometimes the world obeys them.

I think that this is a powerful moment in Blanchot, and (to the extent that any moment is typical of his power) typical of his power. His fiction and his criticism are about what Joseph Libertson calls proximity without presence, and in Blanchot that tends to come out as the exercise of the will in intense solitude, on the one hand, and as someone else's observation of such an exercise of the will, despite her solitude, on the other. To put it this way is too schematic, but I do so just to recollect the fictional moments that are always central to his work: two figures meet in some terrible human extremity, and one pays infinite attention to the other, while the other, whose unhappiness can bear no finite attention, bears that infinite attention because of its infinite carefulness, infinite tact. A little later in *L'arrêt de mort*comes a moment where such mutual proximity (what he calls a double dissymmetry in *L'entretieninfini*) fails, although the narrator's attention to its failure is part of the attention that is also what makes that failure important. He describes that failure this way. He has not been frank with her about what has happened to her in her illness the night before, and she has guessed it. "This lack of candor left us face to face like people who observe each other but no longer see each other."

So what could evolutionary psychology say about the power in such moments as these? (If I haven't conveyed that power in my quick summary, I can certainly say that readers of Blanchot feel it, and so my question remains.) Or rather, the question I would prefer to ask is what light can moments like this cast on evolutionary history?

To answer this I have to give a very quick argument here, and focus on only one feature of that argument.

The evolution of cooperation has been a major focus for evolutionary psychology through the subdiscipline of evolutionary game theory. The basic idea is this: costly signaling

(like Maussian and Batailleandépense) is a central way that an organism can show, or signal, that it can afford the expense of such costly signaling. Costly signaling occurs most familiarly in courtship (e.g. the peacock's tail), but it's ubiquitous. The central insight to hold on to is that costly signaling doesn't pit reproductive success against non-productive activities. They can work in a kind of harmony, without either one being subordinate to the other – a fact most conspicuous when costly signaling becomes sufficiently self-ratifying in a population that it no longer subserves any evolutionary purpose other than the maintenance of the practice of costly signaling. In humans (and some other animals) generosity and cooperation are examples of costly signaling, and cooperation evolved, so the only theory I find plausible goes, because it was a costly signal.

How could this happen? Evidential decision theory gives a solution to the standard scenario used to show the negative paradoxes of selfish (hence parsimonious and non-costly) behavior, Prisoner's Dilemma. The basic idea (familiar to game show aficionados in Britain and on YouTube in the TV show called Golden Balls) is that each player is rewarded for defecting, no matter what the other player does. If the other player defects and you defect, you come out better than if you cooperate; and if the other player cooperates and you defect, you also come out better than if you cooperate. The same is true for the other player. But if you both defect, you will both do worse than if you both cooperate.

The scenario in Golden Balls is slightly simplified, and therefore a little easier to grasp if you're not familiar with Prisoner's Dilemma. At the end of the show, two players are left with a chance for part or all of a large pot of money. Each player makes a decision as to whether to "split" or "steal" the money with the other player. If you steal and the other player splits, you get the whole pot. If you split and the other player splits, you get half the pot. If you split and the other player steals she gets half the pot. In the fourth scenario, by which you both steal, neither gets anything.

When played by perfectly rational people, both should steal. If I steal and you split, I get the whole pot, whereas if I had split instead I would only get half the pot. If I steal and you steal, at least you don't come out ahead – neither of us gets anything – whereas if I had split and you'd stolen, I get nothing, and you would go away not only rich but triumphant. (We can make this into classic Prisoner's Dilemma if either of us had to pay a fine for splitting of the other stole, which would dampen whatever incentive to split there was even farther.) In all cases, it is better to steal than to split, but if both players steal neither gets anything.

The beauty of the game, from a dramatic point of view, is that before the players make their simultaneous and irrevocable decisions, they have a chance to speak to each other. Those conversations are almost always the same, and yet are always passionate and intense. Each tries to "command" the other, to quote Blanchot again, non-causally andonly through the energy of a desperate avowal – through needing the other person to need him or her to split. Obviously the game show finale is trivial, but it is a trivial

instance of something real and therefore worth thinking through. How do you influence someone non-causally? What kind of influence is that?

The answer seems to involve something deep about emotional engagement. Let's observe (what interviews with finalists after the last round of Golden Balls seem to confirm) that most people would split (against their own most selfish interests) if they were sure that the other player would split. (Stealing seems to be a bitter and not a greedy play.). Why is that? Introspection yields the same answer as evolutionary game theory (as well it should): the best way to ensure that it's reasonable to expect the other person to split is to determine that you yourself will split. You take yourself as an example of what people will do in such circumstances, and therefore of what the other person will do. By splitting you can take yourself as an example of the likelihood that she will split. Splitting ratifies your hope that someone will split in this situation – since after all *you* are splitting. Further it ratifies your sense that she is thinking about you and about ratification, just as you are thinking about her. Since these thoughts are counter to "rational choice," counter to cold-blooded calculation, they have a large component of what we call emotion. Emotion is at once (this is the James-Lang theory) and seamlessly a feeling and the expression of the feeling, or rather the very feeling of expressing that feeling. So the feeling and its expression are both the catalysts of a desire *to ratify your choice to split by splitting*, and the signal that you will do just that, encouraging the other player of the game to think and to do and to feel the same way – the same way as you are encouraging yourself to think and to do and to feel about their likelihood of doing that.

Emotion, then, is a major example of the phenomenon of costly signaling. True emotions are difficult to fake and therefore (we can see) were evolved because they could be taken as honest signals. They are difficult to fake because they are costly, which is to say that in order to be difficult to fake they had to evolve as expressions that had to be costly to express. (Thus, tears or rage may blind you, blushing involves a rush of adrenalin, laughing makes you breathless and contorts your body, and aggressive postures are ways, paradoxically, highly vulnerable ones, as when an angry primate sticks out his chest, to show that you're ready to risk injury for a principle.) Emotions signal the will's entry into a relationship (that's what makes it a relationship) – the will's entry, which means an end of automatism (read behavioral determinism) and the beginning of thought. Emotion is costly signaling and what it signals is costly thinking. It signals it through vulnerability. The costs of costly signaling are the risks it takes by willingly taking on a vulnerability counter to its rational (risk-neutral) interests.

In Prisoner's Dilemma emotion signals costly thinking about costly thinking. Like all emotions, it turns into costly thinking about the emotions of others. Prisoner's Dilemma makes this relationship clear. For here, costly signaling is not only in the emotional (but non-causal) discussion between the two players, but in the actual act of splitting, of cooperating. The signal and what it signals are one. And then actually splitting is a post-facto ratification of the intention to signal that communicate to the other person simply by hoping hard -- hard enough to split -- that their desire to believe your intention to signal will ratify itself by believing you since (you hope) they are themselves also signaling. We both hope hard for a signal, and hoping hard is the signal we're hoping hard for.

The signal and what it signals are one: that's the logic of the word "vow" or "avowal" in J.'s experience of sore need. The word vow, and its etymology, mean both the oath sworn by a sacrificial object and the object sacrificed. A vow is by its nature a costly signal: the conspicuous destruction of wealth and the supplicating offer of further destruction as an earnest (similar word) of the truth of one's vulnerability and need, of the need that makes one vulnerable, and which one's vulnerability intensifies. One more piece of this argument may be seen in the Freudian concept of anaclisis, or propping, as Laplanche and Pontalis describe it. (The logic here is an ontogenic recapitulation of the logic of "exaption" in evolutionary phylogeny.) J.'s will is non-strategic – fair enough, that's the point -- but also non-supplicating and entirely inward and silent. Freudian anaclisis sees later erotic and emotional life as propped on early needs. Thus Blanchot's narrator describes J. as being like a child in the energy of her desperate vow. But children are not silent, as she is: their cries of hunger are primordially costly signals that do command the world because their elders must feed them before predators locate them. There begins our relation with others which at its most intense is a relationship of directed and passionate need, even inwardly, even silence, even only in looking at and being seen as a living soul whose will and need can become entirely inward, non-supplicating, and silent. When need and love are one, when need becomes love and love becomes need, they mean the renunciation of strategy. An evolutionary psychology which aims to be true to human experience has to give an account of this, and I think that reading writers like Blanchot (reading writers who are like Blanchot, reading writers as Blanchot reads them) shows what any serious psychology must describe if it is to be exempted from the charges of a coarsening reductiveness.

The American poet Wallace Stevens loved Blanchot (as he says in a letter written a few months before his death), and so I'd like to conclude with a passage from one of his late poems, one which uses the same vocabulary as Blanchot to say something very similar:

> Our breath is like a desperate element
> That we must calm, the origin of a mother tongue
>
> With which to speak to her, the capable
> In the midst of foreignness, the syllable
> Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry,
>
> The cry that contains its converse in itself,
> In which looks and feelings mingle and are past
> As a quick answer modifies a question,
>
> Not wholly spoken in a conversation between
> Two bodies disembodied in their talk,
> Too fragile, too immediate for any speech.