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Literature, Science, and the New Humanities (Review)

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roadmap for applying cognitive research to the study of literary themes, plots, genres, and motifs. And the book she has written provides good evidence that the cognitive-evolutionary study of literature has become a mature and enduring field of inquiry.

NEWMAN UNIVERSITY

MICHAEL AUSTIN

Literature, Science, and the New Humanities, by Jonathan Gottschall; xvi & 217 pp. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, \$84.95 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

In *Literature, Science, and the New Humanities*, Jonathan Gottschall urges fellow literary scholars to embrace the scientific method to cure their discipline's current malaise. Drawing on commentary on the current state of literary studies from many scholars within the field, Gottschall concludes that "the prognosis is bad: the primary theoretical, methodological, and attitudinal struts that support the field are suffering pervasive rot" (p. 3). Although the postmodernist eagerness to prioritize *insolubility* as a core feature of literary understanding has had a central role in shaping the current dilemma, the crisis actually originates, according to Gottschall, in the failure of literary scholars to produce "durable knowledge," a failure that spans the history of literary scholarship and is a feature of schools and approaches that are in other respects mutually antagonistic (p. 7). While the results of science have been applied to literary study with varying success many times before, this is not what Gottschall has in mind, because only scientific method can shrink the space of possible explanation and so produce meaningful results.

Gottschall's book is divided into two major parts, the first of which contains three short chapters devoted to the theoretical rationale, and the second of which provides four examples of the application of quantitative methods to folk tales. In the first chapter, Gottschall argues for consilience between the humanities and the sciences, focusing principally on the value of the evolutionary paradigm and placing both misunderstandings about evolution and the shortcomings of Darwin's thought in historical perspective. In "On Method," Gottschall presents the bulk of his argument for the embrace of scientific methodology within literary studies. In the final chapter of Part I, "On Attitude," Gottschall argues for a rehabilitation of Arnoldian disinterestedness in contradistinction to "the boundary-wrecking juggernaut of Theory" (p. 68). The four chapters in Part II describe the methods employed and explain the results of several studies, focused on, respectively, the characteristics of heroines; recent feminist analyses of fairytales; emphases on male and female attractiveness; and the universality of romantic love.

Gottschall articulates the view of a small but prominent group of scholars who believe that literary studies has much to gain through empirical and quantitative research. In this sense, *Literature, Science, and the New Humanities* makes an important contribution to debates about scientifically informed literary studies. But the title of Gottschall's book alone suggests that he aims at more than a modest proposal for the usefulness of testable methods. For those interested in how such a methodological shift fits into a general reconceptualization of the purpose and organization of literary studies—a group I deem to be Gottschall's primary audience—the book comes up frustratingly short of its goal.

A proposal to reorganize or reconstitute a discipline should tacitly address an array of questions about the discipline's purpose (then, now, and in the future); about the object of study and its likeness to or difference from objects studied by the newly proposed methods; and about the relationship between scholarship and teaching and, correspondingly, the curricular implications of the new proposal. One of the problems is that Gottschall assumes at the outset that the goal of literary studies is about producing "durable knowledge." This is a position well worth arguing for, but it is hardly self-evident and unproblematic, or for that matter a historically recognized goal of literary studies. The institutional study of vernacular literatures dates only to the late nineteenth century, and the sharpening of focus on literary works that attended Russian, Leavisite, and New Critical formalisms in the first half of the twentieth century ironically exposed the difficulty of objective studies of the text by virtue of an inevitable emphasis on interpretation. Meanwhile, literary historicism, which preceded formalisms and whose value is still well recognized, and which arguably produces "durable knowledge" (since facts are hard to refute), seems to all parties insufficient as a sole method of literary study. How do quantitative and empirical studies complement literary historical and interpretive scholarship, and how do they enhance pedagogy? Gottschall should at least touch upon these matters, but there is no developed vision of the implications of this new direction for the field.

Rather than devoting Part I to a rationale for the new humanities, Gottschall spends many pages deploring Theory, both there and in the brief conclusion. While postmodernist theoreticians have undoubtedly established themselves as a professional elite, it is another matter to assert that Theory determines the "dominant paradigm in literary analysis" (p. 171). Large are the number, I suspect, of hard-working scholars who bruise their heads on the drop ceiling of Foucauldian *discours*, and it is they—humanists willing to entertain a fresh thought, practicing cognitive-evolutionary scholars like myself, and current graduate students genuinely excited by scientific approaches—who constitute Gottschall's true audience. As he so thoroughly demonstrates, the arguments against Theory's liberationist paradigm have been rehearsed many times over; those who still cling to a radical skeptical epistemology are unlikely to scramble for surer bearings after one more reasoned explanation. On the other hand,

those of us skeptical of the view that scientific methodology can play a major role in literary scholarship and teaching would be better served by a fuller exposition of the range of current quantitative and empirical studies in the humanities, especially those in literature. Such a discussion would certainly enlighten and perhaps inspire receptive readers, but some of the glosses here are so cryptic (like that of experimental philosophy, which compelled me to search the internet) that they offer no sense of the substance of the projects (p. 63).

Moreover, such a shift in focus in Part I would provide a stronger link with Part II, which presents the results of the four case studies Gottschall himself has supervised. Unsurprisingly, since the need to produce reliable results in pursuit of “durable knowledge” imposes substantial constraints and requires time-consuming, meticulous work, these projects are closely related in topic and method. All take cultural constructivist assertions as their starting point, and three of the four are relevant to gender theory. For example, in chapter four, “The Heroine with a Thousand Faces,” Gottschall notes that, while heroes have been widely studied, little cross-cultural research on heroines exists. Basing his hypothesis on sexual selection theory and studies of mate preference, Gottschall predicts that female characters (1) “would place greater emphasis on a potential mate’s wealth, status, and kindness”; (2) would be characterized as physically attractive; and (3) would be identified as less active than males (p. 94). The data results confirm some but not all of these hypotheses, indicating that “female protagonists pursue their goals differently than male protagonists” and are “less likely than male protagonists to be defined as engaged in acts of specifically physical heroism” (p. 108). Additionally, Gottschall’s sample of tales provided “about 300 percent more references to the attractiveness of females than to the attractiveness of males” (p. 106). However, comparisons of male and female protagonists did not evince differences “in preferences for wealthy and/or high-status mates. For protagonists of both sexes, the ‘extrinsic’ mate qualities of wealth and social status paled in comparison to the ‘intrinsic’ qualities of physical attractiveness and kindness” (p. 102). Attempting to explain this departure from cross-cultural mate preference studies (and the contrasting results of his study for antagonists), Gottschall suggests that such cross-cultural findings point to the pervasive moralizing function of such tales.

Gottschall offers clear explanations of his hypotheses and methods and is candid about results that differ from expectations and about procedures that he would modify in hindsight. As the author himself knows, the ultimate significance of these studies rests on the willingness of other researchers to investigate the same hypotheses in various bodies of oral and literary narrative. But the studies have a range of other implications as well. The unsurprising finding that status seeking is not condoned calls into question the blanket assertion that “The literary scholar’s subject is ultimately the human mind” (p. 17). Rather, literary scholarship investigates a cognitive product shaped by sociocultural

constraints that, notwithstanding their biological basis, change and exert differential pressures on the content and values of imaginative products over time. The thoroughly social nature of language and narrative, for instance, might characteristically depress certain features of our panhuman psychic architecture while highlighting others (sociality and cooperation, in this case).

The narrow parameters of these studies in topic, objects of inquiry, and findings ultimately indicate that scientific methodology can only have a limited role in literary scholarship and pedagogy, for they highlight the inability of such methods to deal with the complexity of literature. Since Gottschall's studies are all of oral narratives, the question arises as to whether such results might be reproduced cross-culturally and transhistorically across written literatures, the dynamics of whose production differs considerably from that of folk forms. To try to demonstrate one of these hypotheses conclusively would be a massive undertaking; at the same time, the contribution to our understanding of literature, while potentially very valuable, would be modest.

I remain dubious about the capacity of empirical approaches to generate a comprehensive understanding of literature. Nevertheless, *Literature, Science, and the Humanities*, along with Gottschall's fine monograph *The Rape of Troy*, exhibit a persistent interest in the biosocial grounds of the representation of women, and thus point to his contributions in another arena. Darwinian feminism has maintained a distinctly low profile and is especially notable for its absence from gender studies, an area that is by definition interdisciplinary. Troublesome as it may be to consider that, for instance, sex differential representations of feats of physical valor, tendencies toward violence, and nurturing behaviors may be the result of normative biological predispositions, sexual inequality will live on heartily if we decide to ignore the evidence. Shedding light on the likelihood that there are, on average, some striking biopsychological and behavioral differences between men and women, Gottschall's work points toward the possibility of genuine equality, whose premise is no longer similarity.

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