

The law also set stringent cleanup standards.

Congress should allow the EPA more discretion, the authors conclude, and the

agency, in selecting a remedy for a particular site, should not always insist on restoring sites to pristine condition.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Literature Gene?

“Darwin and Dickens” by Nick Gillespie, in *Reason* (Nov. 1998), 3415 Sepulveda Blvd., Ste. 400, Los Angeles, Calif. 90034-6064.

The post-structuralist literary critic—who is quite sure that all texts have no fixed meaning, that between the signifier and the signified always falls the shadow—has been much in evidence in English departments in recent decades. But a new rival has been sighted: the evolutionary critic, who approaches literature and literary theory with Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in hand.

One such critic is Joseph Carroll, an English professor at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. In *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), he applies the principles of evolutionary psychology—which holds that much human behavior is governed by the imperative of passing on one’s genes—to classic literary works. Take *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë’s classic tale about the stormy relationship between the founding

Heathcliff and Catherine Linton (née Earnshaw). Raised as brother and sister, they struggle, according to the conventional interpretation, with quasi-incestuous desires. But current ethological research, Carroll points out, shows that unrelated boys and girls raised as siblings are “genetically programmed” to find sexual relations distasteful. There’s no smoldering sexual tension between Heathcliff and Catherine, Carroll insists. They are merely guilty of “infantile tantrums.”

Carroll’s approach is “basically traditionalist” in subject matter and method, observes Gillespie, a *Reason* senior editor. Other evolutionary critics are more trendy, bringing Darwinian insight to literary theory. For instance, Alexander Argyros, author of *A Blessed Rage for Order* (1992), looks upon art

The Biological Great Gatsby

Bert Bender, an English professor at Arizona State University, writes in the *Journal of American Studies* (Dec. 1998) about the heretofore little-noticed “biological undercurrent” in *The Great Gatsby* and other works of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Readers familiar with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s early work might recall that in those years just before the Scopes trial he wrote of Victorians who “shuddered when they found what Mr. Darwin was about”; or that he joined in the fashionable comic attacks on people who could not accept their “most animal existence,” describing one such character as “a hairless ape with two dozen tricks.” But few would guess the extent to which his interest in evolutionary biology shaped his work. He was particularly concerned with three inter-related biological problems: (1) the question of eugenics as a possible solution to civilization’s many ills, (2) the linked principles of accident and heredity (as he understood these through the lens of Ernst Haeckel’s biogenetic law), and (3) the revolutionary theory of sexual selection that Darwin had presented in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). . . . The principles of eugenics, accidental heredity, and sexual selection flow together as the prevailing undercurrent in most of Fitzgerald’s work before and after *The Great Gatsby*, producing more anxiety than love from the tangled courtships of characters he deemed both beautiful and damned.

as “simply the result of [an] incongruity between a rapidly evolving cultural world and our evolutionary heritage.” The creation and interpretation of literature, he maintains, are part of a “gene-culture coevolution, a positive feedback system,” in which genes set the basic rules for culture while “cultural practice creates selective pressure for the survival of certain genes.” In the imagined realm of literature, it seems, humans can test out various possible survival strategies.

Handicapped by its narrow focus and required technical background, evolutionary criticism is unlikely to become a full-fledged academic “movement,” Gillespie thinks. But the evolutionary critics may at least do some good by championing some things that are currently out of vogue in the academic literary world, such as “the scientific method, rational analysis, and the idea that there is something approaching an objective, knowable reality.”

A New Turn in Chinese Painting

“China’s Other Cultural Revolution” by Charles Ruas, in *Art in America* (Sept. 1998), 575
Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

Once the Communists came to power in China in 1949, heavy-handed socialist realism in art was in, and traditional Chinese calligraphy, or ink painting (*guohua*), was out. During the calamitous Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, Mao Zedong’s regime went much further, trying to wipe out all traditional Chinese approaches to art, in favor of militant propaganda conforming to Mao’s every exalted thought.

“The Chinese people,” notes Ruas, a writer and critic, “learned to loathe and fear traditional Chinese forms,” since to do otherwise was to risk one’s life. But since the early 1980s, as the hold of communist ideology has weakened and the regime has relaxed its grip on the economy, Chinese officials—turning to their nation’s Confucian heritage for ideological strength in the face of Western decadence—have made an about-face, encouraging the traditional style of art.

“Suddenly,” Ruas writes, “ink painting was sanctioned for its ‘Chineseness’ but shorn of its historical and ideological context, its roots in the ideal of the Chinese literati, those elite masters of calligraphy and painting with their high Confucian moral and intellectual standards, and their sense of history.”

Surveying the modern part of the massive historical survey of Chinese art exhibited last year by the Guggenheim museums in New York and Spain, Ruas notes that the neo-traditionalist ink and watercolor paintings done since 1980 “hark back . . . to the experimentation of the Shanghai school which began in the last century and lasted through World War

II.” Ironically, this school was not free of Western influence: just the opposite, in fact. In the mid-19th century, Ren Xiong (1823–57) and other artists in the wealthy, Westernized port city of Shanghai incorporated Western influences in both technique and subject matter into traditional Chinese brush-and-ink painting. The Western taste for realism is seen in such works as an undated scroll self-portrait by Ren Xiong, and in his brother Ren Yi’s individualist portrait of a fellow artist in *The Shabby Official* (1888).

The calligraphy of today’s neo-traditionalists “can be powerful and expressive,” Ruas says, “but the subject matter often reiterates time-worn political clichés, as illustrated by Shi Dawei’s 1993 portrait of Mao standing next to an old peasant.” Other artists, showing a strong Western influence, “plunge directly into



Self-Portrait (undated) by
Ren Xiong