

Literature and Storytelling

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ABSTRACT This article argues against evolutionary accounts that reduce literature to a form of adaptive storytelling. While storytelling may serve cognitive and social functions, literature is an aesthetic experience marked by opacity, formal complexity, and non-instrumental value – where “aesthetic” denotes experiential engagement with form, ambiguity, and linguistic texture beyond communicative utility. Drawing on philosophers of literature and literary examples, the paper defends the autonomy of the literary from biological explanation.

Introduction

The enduring human propensity for storytelling has recently been reframed not just as a cultural constant, but as a biological adaptation. Scholars in evolutionary psychology and literary Darwinism, such as Brian Boyd (2009) and Joseph Carroll (2004), argue that narrative is a hardwired cognitive tool, sculpted by natural selection to enhance social cohesion, transmit crucial information, and hone our mental faculties. From this perspective, the campfire myths of our ancestors and the modern novel are points on a single continuum, both ultimately serving the adaptive purpose of survival.

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This provocative thesis, however, forces a critical question: does this adaptive framework adequately account for *literature*? By literature, we mean not storytelling in its broadest sense, but the historically evolving artistic practice – rooted in language, shaped by aesthetic conventions, and prized for its formal complexity and opacity. Is there a meaningful continuity between the narrative we use to plan our day and the experience of reading Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* or savoring the phonetic precision of Nabokov’s *Lolita*? More pointedly, if we accept that storytelling is an adaptation, must we then conclude that literature is merely its elaborate byproduct? And if so, what becomes of the aesthetic dimension – the value we find in ambiguity, form, and non-instrumental beauty – that has long been central to our understanding of literary art?

This paper argues that while storytelling may be a biologically grounded capacity, literature constitutes a distinct phenomenon that cannot be reduced to an adaptive function. Proponents of literary Darwinism rightly acknowledge literature’s aesthetic power but seek to subsume it under an evolutionary *telos*, framing it as a mechanism for sharpening cognition or fostering group cohesion. This paper contends that such an approach, while valuable for explaining the ubiquity of narrative, fails to capture the essence of literary art. We will demonstrate that literature – from its oral origins (Ribeiro 2015) to its diverse modern forms (Howell 2002) – is defined by its *opacity* and its commitment to aesthetic value for its own sake, features that actively resist instrumentalization. By examining the claims of literary Darwinism, rigorously distinguishing narrative from literature, and defending the irreducible specificity of literary art, this paper aims to reassert the autonomy of the literary from biological explanation.

1. Storytelling as a Biological Function

Brian Boyd (2009), Joseph Carroll (2004, 2006), Ellen Dissanayake (1988), and Jonathan Gottschall (2012), have argued – among others – that storytelling plays an evolutionary role, having developed as an adaptive capacity in humans. For Carroll, literature is part of a human “behavioral system” that coordinates emotion, thought, and social behavior, ultimately serving an adaptive function (Carroll 2004: 116). Similarly, Boyd argues that art, including literature, originates in play – a widespread adaptive behavior in animals – and that its cognitive challenges offer survival advantages by honing our mental skills (Boyd 2009: 15-85). Take, for

instance, our ability to structure past events temporally and causally – a crucial cognitive function that helps individuals form a coherent sense of identity and orientation in the world. This narrative organization of experience, whether real or imagined, appears to align closely with what literature has done for centuries, from the Homeric epics to contemporary novels.

Indeed, stories play a fundamental role in how we understand the world and ourselves. We frame our perceptions, memories, and anticipations within narrative structures. Our explanations of the past, interpretations of the present, and projections into the future all tend to take the form of a story. Some even argue that this narrative capacity is essential to rationality and psychological development (Dennett 1991).

Yet, this optimistic view has been met with scepticism (Livingston 2009 and Strawson 2004)³ – particularly due to the ambiguity of the concept of “narrative” itself. Critics point out that storytelling is often retrospective: we frequently explain our actions only after the fact. While we live, we are immersed in experience, not always able to articulate causes or consequences. The familiar “at that point I realized...” or “I had no choice but to...” rarely coincides with the lived moment, but retroactively shapes the memory into a coherent account (Goldie 2012: 148). In this sense, reality often requires a narrative framework – one that supplies causality, goals, and coherence – to become intelligible (N. Carroll 2007). Storytelling thus serves as a powerful tool for organizing fragmented events, making them understandable and communicable (Cooper 1988). However, as compelling as this account is, it risks conflating narrative as a cognitive function with literature as an aesthetic practice. One might contend, as Ellen Dissanayake does, that art’s formal complexity itself “makes special” ordinary experience, thereby serving adaptive ends like reinforcing group identity or promoting cognitive coordination (Dissanayake 1988: 92). Yet this reasoning commits a genetic fallacy, confusing the origin of a capacity with the purpose of its products. While literature may incidentally stimulate cognition, its aesthetic value (e.g., Beckett’s untranslatable wordplay or Kafka’s unresolved paradoxes) operates independently of utility. A sonnet’s volta or *Lolita*’s phonetic precision prioritizes artistic integrity over survival logic, resisting instrumentalization.

Therefore, the fact that humans naturally construct stories to make sense of life does not mean that literary works – designed, opaque, and shaped by artistic conventions – are reducible to

³ Strawson (2004: 428) explicitly writes: “I think there are deeply non-narrative people, and that there is nothing wrong with that. I also think that the Narrative approach to self is incorrect, or at least seriously misleading”.

this same function. And it is precisely this conflation that the rest of this paper will seek to question.

Moreover, when the stories we tell concern ourselves, we tend to adopt a revisionist stance – altering, embellishing, or even distorting events not merely for coherence, but to create accounts that feel convincing and satisfying to us⁴. In shaping our narratives, we often remember things that never actually happened⁵. And this is not a flaw of memory, but part of how narrative functions: it imposes structure and meaning where chaos might otherwise prevail.

As Primo Levi insightfully observed, memory, despite its beauty and power, is far from infallible. It does not preserve events like a camera; rather, it transforms them over time – erasing, reshaping, and incorporating details from other sources. “The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone,” he writes, “but often change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features” (Levi 2013: 15).

Importantly, this narrative reconstruction is shaped not only by individual psychology but also by social context. We tell different versions of our story depending on whether we are speaking to a friend, a doctor, a lover, or a potential employer (Kerby 1991). These shifting perspectives are rarely deceitful in intent; rather, they reflect the human drive to render our lives intelligible to others – and to ourselves.

Stories we tell also help us envisage if not even simulate potential situations: by considering fictional scenarios and simulating possible outcomes, our brain can play out events without the risk and expense of attempting them physically. Simulation of the future allows us to test theories and assumptions, to evaluate risks, as research on counterfactual reasoning has abundantly shown (Bechara, A.R. Damasio, H. Damasio, Anderson 1994). Conditional sentences and modal constructions prove therefore to be fundamental elements for human survival by representing events that *might* happen: humans don’t want to be involved in any action/event whatever to discover its consequences, and the production and evaluation of

⁴ Strawson (2004: 443-446) shows how actually, the more one tries to remember and tell facts about her life and past, the more one runs the risk of moving away from the truth and from any form of authentic self-understanding. The more reality is told, the more it is invented (often without our being aware of it).

⁵ And it is precisely because we remember what did not happen that activities such as literary-narrative turn out to be so congenial to humans: “Writing fiction is like remembering what never happened” Hustvedt (2011: 165).

counterfactual situations (e.g. “what if I crossed the street with the red light?”, “what if I bet all on red?”, “what if I go to sleep not having closed the main door?”) is an excellent way to test and refine one’s behaviour.

All of this shows how deeply embedded storytelling is in our cognitive and social lives. But again, the question must be asked: does this explain what literature is? Or does it merely describe the mental scaffolding on which literary art occasionally builds? The danger lies in mistaking this universal narrative impulse for the specific, constructed, and aesthetic nature of literature – a confusion this paper seeks to disentangle.

2. Literature, Stories, and Human Beings

There is little doubt that storytelling has played an evolutionary role in human development. It helps us imagine other minds, build social bonds, navigate uncertainty, and simulate future scenarios. It explains why the familiar “once upon a time” formula is so effective, why dreams take narrative form, and why we never stop telling stories – even when we are alone. Stories are, as it were, the gymnasium of our social imagination.

Yet it is crucial to distinguish between storytelling as a basic cognitive capacity and literature as a historically situated artistic practice. Not all stories are literature, just as not all literature is narrative. A little story used to illustrate a philosophical concept – like the story of Jay and May used to teach Kripke’s theory of proper names – has a clear communicative and didactic function, but no literary ambition. Conversely, many literary works, from surrealist poems to linguistic experiments, do not communicate anything and nonetheless ask for aesthetic appreciation.

More importantly, the two forms serve different ends. The narratives we construct about ourselves aim at clarity, transparency, and explanatory coherence. They help us organize experience and share it with others. Literature, by contrast, is defined precisely by its *opacity*. It presents content through a particular perspective, shaped by form, rhythm, and structure. This is what readers attend to: not simply what happens, but how it is told. A literary work can surprise or disappoint expectations (Lamarque 2014: ch. 8), because its value lies not in the efficient communication of information, but in the aesthetic experience it produces.

It is therefore misleading – and potentially distorting – to emphasize the continuity between everyday stories and literary works. To conflate the two is to miss what makes literature distinct: its status as art, not as adaptation. As Peter Lamarque (2014: 1-33) argued, what fundamentally distinguishes literature from ordinary storytelling is its *opacity*⁶ – as opposed to the *transparency* typical of everyday narratives. Opacity, in this context, refers to the fact that literary works resist being paraphrased or reduced to a simple message. They are to be interpreted, not merely decoded. This opacity operates on both the level of comprehension and that of appreciation. When we read a literary work, we assume – often implicitly – that every detail is meaningful (*principle of functionality*), that characters and events must be understood in light of the work’s overall structure (*teleological principle*), and that the work invites thematic interpretation (*thematic principle*) (Lamarque 2014: 72-77). These principles guide our engagement with literature in ways that differ markedly from how we process utilitarian or communicative texts. This opacity extends beyond narrative to language itself. Keats’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*) thins paraphrase through irreducible tension. Unlike survival narratives that seek resolution, literary language sustains ambiguity – not to clarify experience, but to deepen aesthetic provocation. Here, opacity becomes ontological: the poem exists as a linguistic artifact first, a communicative tool second.

Importantly, these features are not accidental: they are constitutive of what makes a work *literary*. The literary text is not a window we look through to see the world more clearly, but rather a surface we look at – like a stained glass window – where meaning emerges from color, pattern, and design. We are not interested in extracting content from the text, but in experiencing form and meaning as intertwined.

In this sense, literary opacity is not an obstacle to understanding but the very condition of literary experience. And it is precisely this aesthetic opacity that resists the explanatory models offered by evolutionary and cognitive theories of storytelling (Lamarque 2014: 3).

⁶ The term “opacity” was originally introduced by Todorov (1967) to emphasize that characteristic for which poetic language is self-referential, not referring to something outside itself, but only to itself, and figurative. Self-referentiality, however, is derived from another characteristic of poetic language, that for which it requires to be treated as an aesthetic object.

Furthermore, literary works do not present us with real people to whom things happen and whose stories are told retrospectively. Instead, they offer us *literary characters* – entities that may resemble real individuals in some respects, but whose ontological status is entirely different. They exist not as persons, but as structured figures within a fictional design. As Aristotle famously noted in the *Poetics* (1451b), literature is concerned not with what *has* happened (as history is), but with what *could* happen – what is *plausible*, *possible*, and *universally relevant*.

Therefore, the value of literary characters lies not in how closely they mirror real people or how easily we can identify with them, but in the way they are constructed to express general human possibilities. The temptation to read literature as a mirror of life – or to seek emotional identification with its characters – risks obscuring what makes literary experience distinctive.

Indeed, the distinction between *opacity* and *transparency* applies here as well. Life narratives aim for clarity, causality, and coherence. Literary narratives, by contrast, operate through form, ambiguity, and symbolic depth. Emphasizing the *difference* between these two domains – rather than the similarity – is crucial if we are to preserve the specificity of literature.

This is precisely what is lost in evolutionary accounts that treat literature as an extension of adaptive storytelling. In doing so, they risk reducing literature to an emotional rehearsal for social life, ignoring its aesthetic autonomy and its irreducibly formal character.

If we approach literature with the expectation that it offers a transparent view of reality, we risk losing what makes it a work of art:⁷ something crafted in a particular way, by a particular author, for a specific mode of aesthetic appreciation (Lamarque 2014: ch. 4). Literature is not meant to function as a mirror or manual for life – it is designed to meet aesthetic demands, not practical ones. Projecting our lives onto literary narratives – or interpreting them as templates for how we should live – can lead to a distorted understanding of both literature and ourselves. We may begin to impose meaning on events that have none, to structure our actions according to fictional models, to rationalize choices under narrative pressures, and to read our lives as if

⁷ Of course, there are also positions that oppose this aestheticized and aestheticizing view of literature. For instance, Hirsch (1978: 48) argues that “if literature were just a subspecies of the category of art, and if art were something that is only properly understood and appreciated under aesthetic principles [e.g., the ‘disinterested contemplation of beauty’], then our literary and cultural lives would be much impoverished”. In his view, “to regard literature as primarily and essentially aesthetic is not only a mistake – it also represents a very unfortunate narrowing of our responses to literature, and of our perception of its breadth and possibilities”.

they followed a literary plot. In doing so, we risk mistaking narrative coherence for existential truth.

Ultimately, this misreading stems from the same confusion at the heart of the evolutionary approach to literature: the idea that its value lies in its utility. But literature does not offer guidance, therapy, or adaptation. It offers *form*, *vision*, and *aesthetic experience* – and to seek something else in it is to miss what it uniquely gives.

While it is true that both literature and everyday life involve stories, it is essential to underscore the profound differences between them – differences often overlooked by literary Darwinists and similar approaches.

Concepts like evolution and adaptation may shed light on the cognitive and social function of storytelling, but they cannot account for what literature *is* – nor why human beings are so deeply drawn to it as an aesthetic experience, contrary to what adaptationist and evolutionary theorists suggest (J. Carroll 2004: viii). While storytelling may indeed be a biological trait of our species, as Brian Boyd (2009: 1) and others argue, this does not extend to literature understood as art. Literary works are not adaptive tools, nor do they serve any clear biological function. They do not aim to solve problems, ensure survival, or enhance fitness. Their value lies elsewhere: in aesthetic form, in linguistic play, and in the experience of meaning that resists utility.

In this sense, literature's primary value is not one of instrumental use but of unique and irreducible aesthetic appreciation. While literature may incidentally offer cognitive, moral, or psychological benefits – as argued by philosophers like Martha Nussbaum (1990; 1998) – these are often contingent byproducts rather than its defining purpose. To claim that literature's *essential* function is adaptive is to confuse these potential effects with its core aesthetic nature, which operates on a different register, one of disinterested contemplation and formal engagement. And that, far from being a weakness, is precisely what grants it its distinctive power. If we judged literature by the role it plays in our evolutionary development, then questions of beauty, style, innovation, and form would become irrelevant. Whether a work is aesthetically powerful or artistically mediocre would no longer matter – only its utility would count. But that is clearly not how we engage with literature.

It is true that writing can have therapeutic or communicative benefits. Goethe may have found relief in composing *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, just as Flaubert did with *Sentimental Education*. Today, billions of people share personal stories – traumas, desires, dreams – on social media, and they, too, derive psychological benefits from storytelling. But literature is not simply self-expression, nor is it a tool for cognitive health. The fact that storytelling may support the “cognitive immune system” of the species does not mean that literature partakes in this function. Literature, in most cases, is *pure luxury* – an art form pursued not for survival, but for aesthetic satisfaction. And it is precisely this non-necessity that makes literature what it is: not an instrument, but an experience.

Just remember Vladimir Nabokov’s words in his *Envoi*, while closing his *Lectures on Literature* and saying goodbye to his students:

The novels we have imbibed will not teach you anything that you can apply to any obvious problems of life. They will not help in the business office or in the army camp or in the kitchen or in the nursery. In fact, the knowledge I have been trying to share with you is pure luxury. It will not help you to understand the social economy of France or the secrets of a woman’s heart or of a young man’s heart. But it may help you, if you have followed my instructions, to feel the pure satisfaction which an inspired and precise work of art gives; and this sense of satisfaction in its turn goes to build up a sense of more genuine mental comfort, the kind of comfort one feels when one realizes that for all its blunders and boners the inner texture of life is also a matter of inspiration and precision.

In this course I have tried to reveal the mechanism of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces. I have tried to make of you good readers who read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations. I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation. We did not talk around books, about books; we went to the center of this or that masterpiece, to the live heart of the matter. (Nabokov 1980: 381-382)

That is why literature, understood as art, cannot be accounted for in terms of Darwinian adaptation. Reading novels or poems is not as biologically ingrained as fearing snakes or caring

for offspring. While it is plausible that storytelling – in its most basic narrative form – played a significant role in our evolutionary past, this does not mean that reading Mrs. Dalloway, *Lolita*, or the poetry of John Keats offers any adaptive advantage. The imaginative, aesthetic, and reflective dimensions involved in literary reading are of a different order altogether. In other words, Palaeolithic people gathered around a fire to hear a tale performed were engaging in an activity that, while related to narrative, differs profoundly from the solitary, introspective, and symbolically dense experience of reading literature as we know it today.

The point here is straightforward: acquiring and sharing environmental information, imagining non-existent scenarios, experiencing emotions, and communicating with others are all essential functions for human survival – just like memory, reasoning, perception, recursive syntax, or the use of modal tense. However, these functions cannot be automatically equated with literature. Even storytelling, as a cognitive and social tool, is not the same as creating literary works. Humans may tell stories to make sense of the world, to understand themselves and others, to promote cooperation, to pass down knowledge, or to test hypothetical situations for problem-solving purposes. But none of these reasons necessarily explains why someone writes Mrs. Dalloway or *Ulysses*, or why Keats devoted himself to poetry. The motivations behind literature as art respond to different, non-adaptive impulses – aesthetic, expressive, even self-destructive ones – which cannot be reduced to evolutionary utility.

This distinction between storytelling as a potential adaptive function and literature as an aesthetic practice is further illuminated by considering the products themselves. The evolutionary psychologist might argue that the human impulse to create elaborate, non-utilitarian symbolic artifacts (like literature) is an adaptation, regardless of an individual author's conscious motives. However, this argument struggles to explain the specific, historically contingent forms that literature takes. The intense focus on phonetic patterning in Nabokov's *Lolita*, the relentless formal experimentation of Beckett's self-translations (for instance in his *Mercier et Camier*), or the sheer opacity of a Kafka parable (in *The Metamorphosis*) – these features are not optimizations for adaptive efficiency (e.g., clear communication, social bonding, or problem-solving). Instead, they prioritize aesthetic principles that often work against such utilitarian goals, creating experiences valued for their complexity, ambiguity, and resistance to easy interpretation. The crucial question, therefore, is not about individual motivation (why authors feel compelled to write – “*Pourquoi écrivez-vous?*” was the question asked by *Libération* during the Fifth Paris Book Fair in March 1985

to 400 authors), but about cultural history (how the practice of writing evolved to prioritize such non-adaptive, aesthetic complexities). The answers from writers like Beckett (“Good for anything else”) or Duras (“I don’t know anything, I’ve never known what this strange activity is”) point not to a shared evolutionary function, but to a profound engagement with the aesthetic possibilities of language itself, a pursuit that often feels more like a compulsion than a calculated strategy for survival.

The production of literature is, therefore, a far more blurred and complex phenomenon than literary Darwinists tend to assume. Even if we accept the idea of a continuity line between the storyteller and the literary human – even if literature does provide “lively and powerful images of human life suffused with the feeling and understanding of the astonishingly capable and complete human beings who wrote them” (J. Carroll 2004: 68) – literature is also much more than that. It is a superb use of language, a vivid way of conveying meaning, and sometimes of dissolving it. It is a means of creating and revealing things while narrating them.

In sum, literature cannot be reduced to storytelling. More importantly, although literary works often do tell stories – stories that might be interesting, shocking, disturbing, or enlightening – this is not what makes them masterpieces. We do not regard them as literature because of the stories they tell, but because of the way those stories are told.

For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann. (Nabokov 1997: 314-315)

3. Biological and Aesthetic Value of Literature

Literary Darwinism, as the latest trend in literary criticism, seeks to explain – from neurophysiological or evolutionary perspectives – what happens when we invent, tell, or read stories and songs. Its goal is to demonstrate how these activities confer cognitive and adaptive

advantages that help human beings survive and thrive, distinguishing us from other species. This materialist approach discards the idealist or spiritualist notions traditionally attached to “literary creation” – often conceived as a quasi-divine act of genius.

However, while literary Darwinists trace a sweeping arc from the cognitive revolution of the Upper Paleolithic to contemporary literature, they tend to overlook a crucial historical discontinuity: the birth of written literature around five thousand years ago. They understate the radical transformation that occurs between a chipped stone tool and a novel like *Infinite Jest*, between natural symbolism and the self-conscious, form-bound, and medium-specific art of writing. Critically, written literature’s emergence (more or less 5000 years ago) enabled practices alien to oral storytelling: private rereading, authorial revision, and intertextual allusion (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses*). These demand engagement with form *as* content – a self-referential loop absent in fire-side tales. When Nabokov crafts *Lolita*’s opening for phonetic precision (“Lo-lee-ta”), he exploits writing’s capacity for aesthetic density, not adaptive efficiency.

Apparently in such an approach not *what* is literature, but *what* is literature *for*, *what is its role* in our development as human beings, is the question. Unlike Wystan Hugh Auden, who in a famous line said that “Poetry is the art of substantiating shadows, and of lending existence to nothing” (Auden 2007: 88-90), literary Darwinists believe that literature has changed the world, in particular the human species in comparison with other ones, since literature is one of the primary shaping forces of individuals and societies.

It may be true that many of our journeys end at the end of the line, but that of Anna Karenina at the Moscow station, with that red handbag that for a very long moment had tried to hold her, was a *sad, lonely and final* terminus, with the sign of the cross and that last second thought, before the candle in whose light she had read life’s deceptions and sorrows switched off forever. And then, yes, we fall in love (although we mostly believed we were falling in love, but we didn’t realize it until later) many times, but we rarely got that perfection described by Francis Scott Fitzgerald in the fifth chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, when Gatsby meets Daisy again after a long time (“Five years next November”), at Nick’s house, but then he doesn’t want him to leave letting them both alone, and not so much because he is embarrassed and terrified, but above all because he is afraid that without a witness that wonderful newfound love of his could

suddenly vanish, like a soap bubble. Things, especially unbelievable ones, exist only to the extent that we are not the only ones who see them.

And again, we experience the inebriation and purification of fasting, but what we find in Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Anthony* opens to us the doors of perception, leading us straight to mystical delirium, while that of Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* shows us with a few brushstrokes the purity of that force that knows how to replace life, that all-encompassing power of art that has no other objective than itself.

Finally, we taste Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* in French, in its essential and spiky style, but then we cannot resist and we are tempted by the English translation (a clearly suffered version, which Beckett had taken four years to complete and which compared to the original French has at least 12% *omissis*), with those words carved to perfection that remind us of which language the author is master and which instead, he is a guest. How much more lapidary is "sophistry" than "raisonnement du clerc" in "Sophistry, said Mr Conaire"? And what rhythm does the word "crusts" manage to give when replacing "pain sec" in the sentence "Yesterday cakes, today sandwiches, tomorrow crusts, and Thursday stones"? Beckett translating himself looks like one of those cats blowing at their image in the mirror: first, he plays, then he is scared, he retreats, but in the end, he seems to understand and, simply, lets it be.

In short, as Fernando Pessoa (1966: 286) says, literature, as all art, is the confession that life is not enough – not an adaptive supplement, but a confrontation with life's insufficiency through crafted form. And so, this journey was not without return. We are back to square one, yes, but to question again about literature. Being able to grasp its evolutionary scope is not enough to appreciate a literary text: it is one thing to *evaluate* the importance of telling stories *for the evolution* of our species, and another is to *evaluate* in the sense of *feeling* and *aesthetic appreciation*. We will go on, of course, asking ourselves if the fact of being storytelling animals has had a central role in making us be specifically what we are, but we will also ask ourselves, inhaling to hold that *frisson* along the spine, the secret of the enchantment of that tongue that makes three turns on the palate before knocking against the teeth – "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 1997: 1) as the first lines of Nabokov's masterpiece read – to pronounce words as soft as velvet and rhythmic as time. And we will go on asking because,

alongside stories, there are also sculptures made with words whose musicality, ambiguity, and form, we admire when relaxing and letting our spines take over.

Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week. (Nabokov 1980: 64)

Notably, neurocognitive studies reveal that aesthetic responses activate the brain's Default Mode Network (DMN) – a system associated with introspection, self-referential thought, and internal mentation rather than problem-solving or goal-directed behavior. This neural pattern, often described as “artistic satisfaction,” is markedly distinct from utilitarian or pragmatic processing, thereby underscoring literature's decoupling from adaptive function. Empirical evidence supports this: Vessel, Starr, and Rubin (2013) demonstrate that engaging with aesthetic stimuli – whether visual art, music, or literature – consistently activates the DMN. Similarly, Chatterjee and Vartanian (2016) argue that aesthetic processing recruits distinct neural pathways, including the DMN, and is fundamentally detached from survival-oriented cognition. According to them, such responses are characterized by disinterested contemplation rather than instrumental reasoning. This neural model provides a biological correlate for the kind of deep, non-utilitarian engagement demanded by literary opacity. The activation of the DMN during aesthetic experience aligns with the reader's focus on form, pattern, and self-referential meaning in a text – precisely the features that distinguish reading Nabokov or parsing a Keats ode from processing a utilitarian narrative (Jacobs 2015).

4. Conclusion

Anthropologists and psychologists have long recognized an innate human inclination toward storytelling. Building on their insights, some scholars in literary studies and philosophy have sought to apply evolutionary principles to the study of literature.

Whether around ancient campfires or in today's physical and virtual spaces, people share stories not merely for entertainment, but to strengthen group cohesion and contribute to cultural evolution. Myths and legends, for example, helped early human communities develop a sense of shared identity and cooperation. In more recent contexts, families continue to reinforce social ties by narrating daily experiences over dinner or watching television together.

Literary Darwinists also insist on the fact that storytelling is useful in transmitting survival-related information, crucial knowledge about navigation, resources, weather and so on. Besides this, storytelling is also considered to play a fundamental role in cognitive development and problem-solving, because while engaging with narratives people exercise imagination, empathy, and critical thinking. Entertainment as well is a significant function of storytelling from an evolutionary standpoint, since the kind of pleasure people derive from storytelling experiences causes the release of neurochemicals associated with reward, hence reinforcing engagement with narratives. In a nutshell, the approach defended by literary Darwinists offers valuable insights into the nature of storytelling and its evolutionary roots. Is this enough to understand or explain the very phenomenon of literature? It seems not. Because literature is more than just storytelling. It is an aesthetic experience, that shiver on the back, the breath caught for the tip of the tongue taking a trip, the emotion caused by nonsense, the intellectual satisfaction derived from reading something that is supposed to answer a question, even if actually, and magnificently, it does not. As in the following example, where W.H. Auden tries to tell the truth about love:

Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go round,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,

Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.

Our history books refer to it
In cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on
The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts of suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on
The backs of railway guides.

Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot?
Does it only like Classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
It wasn't even there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the blackbird sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces?
Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,
or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love. (Auden 2007: 69-71)

Auden's intention is, unmistakably, to tell the truth about love – but he does so not through straightforward definitions, but through rhythm, metaphors, music, flashes of imagery, alliteration, and assonance. We think we know what love is – but do we, really? Love might be imagined as a little boy, a bird, or the force that makes the world go round. Can it either be seen, smelled, or touched? And what are those written accounts talking about love, from mentions in appreciated and influential texts to more general publications? Love can also be and compared to sound. And what about love as a disturbing element? Maybe the confusion caused by it would prevent humans from leading a quiet and peaceful life. Is the absence of love, and of any other stimulus, the only way to achieve a perfect state of quietness? Finally, and at the end, how to tell the truth about love? Are there maybe physical places recalling this feeling? But love is not a concrete entity that can be found hidden somewhere, and it neither seems to have those qualities that can be attributed to persons.

The only plausible answer to these questions is to admit that there is no way, to tell the truth about love. “That Love is all there is, | Is all we know of Love; | It is enough, the freight should be | Proportioned to the groove” as notoriously Emily Dickinson said (1960: n. 1765). We think

we know what love is – until we are asked to define it. And then, suddenly, we don't. That is the power of literature: it reveals the limits of our understanding by tracing those very limits through language. And this is precisely what no biological or Darwinian framework can fully account for. Ultimately, reducing literature to an adaptive tool impoverishes human culture. The Darwinian framework offers a compelling explanation for the ubiquity of narrative but remains a reductive tool for understanding the essence of literature. While it may account for the *capacity* for art, it fails to explain the *content* of artistic value – why we cherish the specific, useless, and often difficult formal achievements of a Nabokov or a Beckett. To demand utility of literature is to silence its greatest power: revealing life's unanswerable questions through form, not function. As Pessoa observed, literature confesses that life is not enough. It is this confession – a confrontation with life's insufficiency through crafted form, not an adaptive tool for survival – that secures literature's autonomy and places its deepest value permanently beyond the grasp of any adaptationist framework.

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