

The Biology of Literary Affect

Thomas Carl Wall

National Taipei University of Technology

William Flesch, *Comeuppance. Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2007), 264pp.

In this book, William Flesch attempts to theorize specifically literary affect (like Hamlet's great and seemingly naïve but disarmingly sensible question concerning one of the Players: "What's he to Hecuba or Hecuba to him that he should weep for her?"). Flesch has made the (for a literary theorist) surprising attempt to account for the possibility of literary passion through a careful nuancing of certain evolutionary biological theories, principally those of the Zahavi's, Fehr, and Sober and Wilson, in contrast to the thinking of E.O. Wilson, Trivers, Dawkins, Pinker and others. Flesch argues (in a way that is thoroughly engaging and even light-hearted) that the claims about literature offered by the best literary critics and the claims of socio-biology are not mutually exclusive. The two areas of expertise are not talking about two distinct objects; there is no misunderstanding; instead there is genuine disagreement. The result is an extremely well documented and detailed journey through biology, psychology, evolutionary theory, game theory, and literature that results in a complex argument. There is no other study quite like *Comeuppance*. The book is a touchstone for further discussion.

Flesch begins: "This book is an attempt to use evolutionary psychology to account for the surprising fact that humans can become so emotionally absorbed in stories we know to be fictions" (1). It will be important to keep in mind that Flesch is concerned specifically with our actual emotional responses to fictions, which are not actual – not to any reality that the fictions may or may not represent. That is to say, Flesch asks why in the world do we really, passionately, care that Superman escape the death trap laid for him by Lex Luthor? Or, why should we actually become anxious about whether or not der Mann vom Lande will ever enter the Law? Or whether Roger Thornhill will succeed in freeing Eve Kendall? Why are we impatient while Achilles sulks in his tent as his fellow Greeks are killed? Or terrified that Othello seems not to be able to defend himself from Iago's rumours and gossip? How is it that this capacity evolved; "why did story-telling (and its necessary complement, story-

attending, being an audience for a story) evolve” (2)? The problem with framing the question in this way is that it has tended to reduce the complexities of literature and our responses to a single unified phenomenon which is then shown to be a ‘useful adaptation’, as ‘advantageous’ for survival. Flesch will say that while this or that phenomenon may be advantageous for survival, that does not logically entail that that is why it evolved. (A credit card may be advantageous in allowing me to escape from a locked room, but that is not why I carry credit cards in my wallet and that is not why they were created.) Instead Flesch wishes to interrogate the bio-evolutionary conditions for the very possibility of the complexity of literature at all. To do so, he begins by dispensing with what I call the ‘strong utilitarian’ view and then begins his own investigation with what I call ‘the evolution of attentiveness’.

In opposing the ‘strong utilitarian’ view Flesch not only departs from a powerful line of thought in evolutionary psychology but also a powerful line of thought in literary criticism from Aristotle through Samuel Johnson and beyond. The utilitarians may agree that literature (and art in general) delights and instructs, but, generally speaking, the instruction half of the equation is given priority. The work of art is conceived of as essentially mimetic and only accidentally delightful. In essence, literary representations are a practice for the game of life. According to this view, by observing literary situations we consume information and are able to hone our skills without there being any real consequences. In contrast, Flesch wishes to argue that delight precedes instruction; we are enthralled by literature prior to any thought of learning anything (8-9). The intensity of literary affect itself is not (according to Flesch) trivial, it is biologically innate, and it requires an explanation. Flesch is re-thinking a question in much the same way that Martin Heidegger re-thought the questions of epistemology. For Heidegger, there must be a dimension that precedes knowing and that dimension is *Sorge*. *Sorge* – which is always translated into English as ‘Care’ but whose meanings are many and complicated (grief, sorrow, worry, anxiety, apprehension, care, trouble, unease, concern) – precedes any knowing, any consciousness, of this or that. Were there no prior concern, there would be no knowing at all. (The scientist who is peering through a microscope sees only what one of his or her eyes sees, and we ourselves do not routinely observe our own noses even though they are within our routine range of vision.) Likewise, for Flesch, literary enthrallment needs to be investigated as prior to literary utility.

But suppose it is true that literature does exist – has evolved – in order for us to learn how to handle complex situations that may occur in real life and thus help maximize the possibility of our survival. Well then, Flesch argues, would it not be better that we tend to experience literature dispassionately, objectively and clearly – like a case study, like data? If you are

injured and must be operated on by a physician do you hope that the doctor anxiously anticipates your recovery, or do you want him or her to go to work cutting and sewing with professional detachment?

Related to this is the common Freudian notion of ‘identification’ wherein I imagine myself to be in Rome or in Egypt or in a tent outside Troy. But if that is true then I would not care what Achilles or Cesar or Anthony think, say, or look like, because I myself am already who they are... but I do care, I attend to every nuance of what is presented of them in the story. I do not read the Iliad in order to learn what to do in a similar situation as Achilles or Hector or Hecuba. I do not put myself in their place. Instead, I am enthralled-ly observant of them and not in any place at all. I am in fact not anybody at all! (Philosophically speaking, there is no subject of enthrallment or attentiveness.) Flesch is here in accord with Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 14.186) where it is not that I imagine that I am on board ship with Ulysses; instead it is that I forget that I am not on board the ship and am purely attentive to and absorbed in what is happening in the story, not in any reality or in any possible reality. That is why we can readily, when we are enthralled in fiction, hope for even supernatural resolutions of anxieties that so frequently occur in fiction. It is not so much that we “willingly suspend disbelief” as Coleridge said, but that we unwillingly forget either belief or disbelief. No one can willingly forget anything. The question that remains for Flesch is why we should be attentive to and enthralled by fictions – with representations themselves – and not what they do, may, or could represent.

Flesch wants to shift to a different framework to get at especially fictional or narrated representations. The framework is the evolution of cooperation (13 ff). He is going to pursue his argument at a level that conceptually precedes imitation/identification. He writes: “We humans are so good at learning because we’re so good at imitating others, and we’re so good at imitating because we’re good at tracking” (17). Flesch is aiming to show that tracking (or monitoring or attending to or simply following, as we follow a plot unfold – what I call attentiveness) is weaker than but may explain more than the stronger notions of imitation (including its strongest form, identification). Tracking is immediate; imitation and identification derive from it, and tracking is essentially a form of (but not an unproblematic form of) cooperation.

The evolution of cooperation, the possibility of altruistic behaviour, is commonly divided into kin and non-kin. Kin cooperation seems to be relatively unproblematic, and Flesch does not dispute many of the claims made for kin cooperation. In a nutshell: the basic unit of evolution (of survival) is the gene, or more specifically, that gene’s DNA, its genetic information: the

form of the gene, not the substance. All the genes of the world are involved in a Hobbsean war of all against all; only the strongest survive. All of human social/psychological behaviour can be traced back to the gene's maximizing of the possibility of its information being passed on from generation to generation. Flesch notes that this drive is apparently hard-wired; that altruism on behalf of kin is a basic component of life, so much so that there is indeed no pleasure involved at all. We just do it. Flesch quotes Wittgenstein to say that Love is not a feeling but instead a deep commitment, something that can be put to the test. From the point of view of the gene, everyday self-sacrifice of the parents on behalf of their children is not altruism at all, but genetic "selfishness".

The thorny question is whether non-kin altruism has a biological component. Supporters of the "selfish gene" thesis will say that certainly we can be altruistic, but only in spite of our biological predilection, or even, more strongly, because of our biological predilection. Because our genes are selfish, we need not be. It is a charming hypothesis, like the age-old nature/nurture dialectic where 'nurture' is a metaphysical supplement always ready to 'correct' natural inclinations. However, a growing number of evolutionary scientists have become convinced that there is a biological component to all kinds of non-kin altruistic behaviour, thus squeezing the age-old dialectic into a single dimension. Game theory seems to provide evidence that behaviour that would be irrational from the point of view of genetic survival has in fact been biologically selected for. In games like the 'Prisoner's Dilemma' and the 'Ultimatum Game' (28ff, and to which I shall return shortly) there is a measurable tendency for human beings to choose against the interest of their genes and to take pleasure in doing so. Somehow or other, nature has provided an incentive to behave altruistically among non-kin. This has proven to be a difficult problem and there is controversy over whether or not it does exist. A Richard Dawkins will argue that the altruism is only apparent, and a logic can be devised to show that the selfish gene is at the root of all non-kin behaviour. Others, including Flesch, disagree. (For still others, the jury remains out. David Barash and others have increasing complicated the games Flesch relies on.) For some, however, non-kin altruism is a biological reality. We have a biological inclination to behave irrationally with respect to ourselves – our own genes' possibility for survival – and we have an expectation that others will do the same. When they do not, as the Ultimatum game shows, we have an inclination to punish the selfish, even at our own expense, and we hold in esteem all others who do the same. Thus, and to get right to the point: Who are the non-kin par excellence? Fictional characters! They are kin to no one.

I think the reader can now anticipate how Flesch's argument unfolds. Non-kin altruism is structured around the expectation that others will behave similarly to us (and thus be cooperative with us) and also around the desire to see the purely selfish punished. In short, a generalized sense of fairness or justice seems to have a biological ground. Cooperation precedes any basic unit of survival, or a sense of justice precedes any unit of survival.

The 'Ultimatum Game' involves two strangers in a one-time-only interaction. One player is given a fairly large sum of money (usually 3 or 4 times that person's monthly salary) and must propose a split with the other person who then either accepts the split or vetoes it. If accepted, each receives what was proposed; if vetoed neither receives any money at all. In this game the second player always comes out better by accepting the split, no matter what it is. Yet, the people tested tend to veto any offer of below 25 percent of the original sum. Why? It seems that the split must conform to some expectation of fairness, as one biologist put it, and when this expectation is frustrated, the second player, in essence, sacrifices gain in order to punish the player who offers the split. Flesch calls this "altruistic punishment". Altruistic punishment is an oxymoron, of course, but it means concretely that we will sacrifice personal gain in order 1) to punish an injustice; 2) to show that we are willing to do this; and 3) to signal to the other the sheer existence of a general sense of fairness. The game works the other way around. Most proposers of the split seem to have an expectation that the other player will be willing to act irrationally – to punish – and so most proposers tend to offer a split considerably higher than 25 percent. This is how cooperation works; considerations of fairness and irrationality are taken into account in making decisions; "a generalized sense of fairness will trump optimal achievement" (32).

The bulk of the book then refines the basic schema I have outlined. Heroes in literature are altruistic punishers; we cheer them on. Cheaters – the purely selfish and also those who can punish but who do not (Flesch calls them "free riders") – we wish to see punished. This seems to be a basic expectation, and we humans have developed a highly sophisticated attentiveness to this, so much so that we track – and take pleasure in tracking – the behaviour of non-kin in order to see and take pleasure in the satisfaction that our biological expectation of fairness will be met. It is this attentiveness that fiction recruits and satisfies with the pleasures of the story in which we anxiously wish to see self-satisfied defectors punished and hold in esteem the altruistic punishers. This explains as well the prevalence of rumour and gossip in societies of all kinds (80-84 and passim). Indeed, the astute French writer Maurice Blanchot once asserted that literature wishes to exist as a rumour exists; as neither true nor false but merely as alluring and inevitable. Interestingly, for

what it's worth, Flesch notes that a neurological study has shown that merely anticipating the punishment of a defector (i.e. one who "defects" from the expectation of fairness and who behaves selfishly) stimulates the so-called pleasure centres in the brain. Flesch makes the point that it is the expectation that stimulates, that is actually pleasurable, not the actual punishment itself that stimulates (unless we have drifted into sadism).

This is the biological component which explains why it is that human beings take so passionate an interest in the non-actual. Fiction, which is never actual, is thus the arena where we find our greatest pleasure in pure expectation of seeing fairness triumph. Pure because, in fiction, no reality whatsoever is at stake.

Flesch is stressing the component of the non-actual. He says that this may explain the unease many feel with regard to the death penalty or to the representation of punishment itself. It is the anticipation of punishment that is the joy, and it is the anticipation that the defector will feel his or her own injustice that we take pleasure in. This is called 'volunteered affect', a notion that Flesch borrows from Adam Smith. When Timothy McVeigh (the Oklahoma City bomber) went to his widely publicized execution unrepentant, there was a strange feeling of dissatisfaction, that our anticipation of punishment had been hijacked and transformed into simple, leaden vindictiveness. Likewise, as in the film *Dead Man Walking*, when the murderer does confess his crime and does suffer evident remorse, there is an element of pity for him and so the representation of his death (from which the film does not flinch) takes on as gruesome an air as did the film's representation of the crime itself. In Shakespeare, after Shylock is punished, he must leave the stage; the spectacle of his continued punishment would yield no pleasure.

To sum up: We can learn from and imitate others extremely well because we are extremely attentive to others. We are extremely attentive to others because we have a biologically innate sense of justice which we expect from others and even from ourselves (which is why we can sympathize with Scrooge when he is given the chance to attentively track himself and suffer from seeing how selfish his own behaviour has been: 163). The innate sense of justice may be simple and unified (it may be universal or biologically selected for), but its application in specific cases is extremely complex – hence our capacity for extreme attentiveness, and hence the complexities of literature. The expectation of justice is an anticipatory joy which we take pleasure in expecting to see satisfied and displeasure in seeing frustrated. When frustrated, we take pleasure in seeing the defector punished when the punisher is altruistic, that is, does not personally gain from the punishing thus signalling the existence of a generalized sense of fair cooperation for which we are willing to sacrifice individual gain.

Hence gossips and rumour mongers who are shown to be simply vindictive or self-motivated are expected to be punished, whereas authors who sacrifice their own actuality – their time and effort it takes to create satisfactory fictions – we tend to admire unless they become extremely wealthy, in which case there develops a feeling of unease. The same is true of entrepreneurs whom we cheer on since they risk something, but at some point Bill Gates (for example) became so wealthy that the wealth itself took on an air of obscenity, and Gates is now a professional altruist (which does not in the least compromise his sincerity) (35). To conclude, *Comeuppance* is both a genuinely unique kind of literary criticism (one unafraid to take on biological and game theory models on their own terms) and also a fine survey of recent work in gene theory from biologists less familiar to the average reader than E. O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins and their students.