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Book Review

Homer, *Horton*, and Evolution: A New Perspective on Narrative

A review of Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009, 560 pp., US\$35.00, ISBN 978-0-674-03357-3 (hardcover).

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Brian Boyd's new book is a major achievement for evolutionary criticism. It is a nearly comprehensive and quite convincing presentation of how natural selection can explain important features in all of the arts (and especially in narratives), in a volume both essential for specialists, and accessible to a wide audience. Boyd adroitly refers to an astonishing array of fields, from cell biology to cartooning, with particular emphasis on neuroscience and developmental psychology, in an internally consistent manner. Indeed, Boyd finds humanlike qualities in shrimp and guppies that are relevant to fiction. He introduces and artfully balances a plethora of interrelated factors in a perspective with many moving parts. While his exploration of male-female distinctions in narrative is somewhat vestigial, and if there does not seem to be enough space to convince us that intelligence originates in movement, for instance (p. 224), Boyd's views are nonetheless diverse and always intriguing, with wonderful illustrations throughout.

Boyd begins Book I by asking a basic question: why do we waste time, and so much else, on the untrue? He points out that fictional narrative develops dependably in all normal humans. Indeed, we cannot desist from constructing and consuming narratives (a proclivity eons old, given the maturity of the oldest surviving examples—as we shall see with Homer's *Odyssey*). He suggests that evocriticism can address such questions in a manner that fully embraces the meaning and pleasure of art. First, he dispels a number of misconceptions regarding the supposed antinomy between our biological heritage and freedom, by showing the manifold interactions of genes and culture—an antimony that well transcends contemporary controversies regarding “nature or nurture”. Boyd attacks the denial of human nature by mainstream “Theory,” which he regards as an aversive reaction to Social Darwinism, but little of the volume is devoted to such rearguard action. He observes more gene-culture interaction than antagonism. Culture is properly to be regarded as an accelerated means of adaptation. He also dispels the equation of the natural with the right or with determinism. As for the “selfish gene,” Boyd points out the special interest of sociobiology in cooperation, a distinguishing human characteristic. Boyd elegantly restates

the essentials of evolution, which are that natural selection pertains to the retention of improvements in physiology, behavior, and psychology, that such a simple theory can explain complex structures, such as the eye, and that drift is directionless, whereas adaptation can account for the design and retention of features.

Boyd claims that evolutionary psychology provides a frame for many social theories, including our propensity for stories. He outlines a complex, flexible model of the largely unconscious mind. He posits modular systems for invariant features of the environment, complemented by developmental systems capable of adapting to more changeable elements, such as conspecifics (the latter faculties are more susceptible to being overridden by the executive brain, whereby conscious problem solving may utilize scenarios, while practice may improve efficiency). Given the universality and self-rewarding character of play in mammals and our appetite for efficient information, Boyd defines art as “cognitive play with pattern” (p. 15). This thinking especially pertains to processing information relevant to our “ultrasocial” character. Our need to understand one another is seen as a driving force in our memory and history. Stories in this view constitute training in “complex situational thought” (p. 49). The course of natural selection has been to widen our behavioral options. Thus, storytelling may increase our potential flexibility of response. Boyd continually suggests a balance between fixed and flexible behavior, and competition and cooperation—a balance that may be explained by multilevel selection theory. He suggests that cooperation of altruistic groups developed from mutualism (e.g., grazing together) and more active forms of cooperation. Much as we have cheater-detection sensitivities, our stories are replete with tales about punishment thereof, thus conveying standards of fairness. Emotions are understood as “logic executors” (p. 55). We value reputation as a response to our need to weed out cheaters and freeloaders, and many of our emotions support reciprocal altruism, especially by “emotional highlighting” (p. 60), which is relevant to cheating. We witness this in stories and religions, both of which almost invariably encourage cooperation.

In Part 2 Boyd applies the foregoing to the evolution of art. He sifts through earlier theories of art’s function and rebuts Geoffrey Miller’s sexual selection theory as, amongst other objections, being inadequate to account for the ubiquity and variety of art. Indeed, art is universal, usually highly valued, and naturally developing in children. Likewise, in Boyd’s view, Steven Pinker’s notion that art is but “cheesecake” for the mind (i.e., an evolutionary byproduct), does not explain its intensity and its waxing popularity. Instead, Boyd says art is cognitive play to engage attention with patterned information. In distinction to most games, art is non-zero sum in the sense that there usually are neither winners nor losers. He cites the attractions and adaptive benefits of pattern recognition, indeed that it is self-rewarding, even in newborns. To explain art we need to attend to attention. Boyd cites the pleasures of social attunement, which greatly promotes social learning. Art, of course, often promotes group cohesion. On the other hand, eliciting attention usually, but not inevitably, correlates with attaining higher status. Hence, the artist may at the same time be self-interested. The arts are often pursued as a means of seeking lasting memory, and art typically plays a prominent role in memorials, including Horace’s poetic “monument more durable than brass” (p. 112). Boyd surmises that art preceded religion, which also depends on the false belief of story and is itself largely narrative in

nature. We especially recall stories that violate our expectations (e.g., our “folk physics”). A related factor is that we are prone to over-attribute agency, as we often do with inanimate objects that move. Art may also involve costly signaling; expensive, hard to fake signs of commitment.

Boyd quite originally advances art as a “Darwinian machine” that generates and selects for creativity, which may function to adapt humans to constantly changing social environments. Art as well promotes a sense of mastery, a notion that dovetails with Ellen Dissanayake’s “Making Special.” Thanks to our capacity for false belief, we can grasp the notion that other people may misconceive. As for fiction, Boyd asks why we have any preference or room for what is acknowledged to be untrue. He adduces this to our craving for high-order information. We might add that successful narratives usually manage to be both novel and typical at the same time. Boyd points out the speed and efficacy of naturally shaped lines of inference, something which develops very early in infants. Boyd brings to the fore a great number of new considerations, including a “theory of bonds.” Mirror neurons promote empathy, whereby we can dependably sense how others feel. In effect he presents a new perspective on how we read multimodally, (i.e., not by just words) and that “we create on the fly a mental world” (p. 157). He sees communication as largely cooperative, answering especially our hunger for social information. Yet Boyd also argues that we talk not so much to exchange information but to gain attention and status. One indication of this is how storytellers usually adjust their narrative to their audience. He notes attention-getting and retaining devices in early childhood play. Autism and its opposite, Williams Syndrome, are cited as additional pieces of evidence that fiction is an adaptation. Cognitive play that is relevant to social cognition provides practice for patterns that we are likely to face in the future, and likewise reinforces moral values. Boyd fruitfully contrasts this with our need for training in abstract thought.

In Book II, Boyd applies the foregoing theory (with added insights into the nature of art) to Homer’s *Odyssey* and Dr. Seuss’ *Horton Hears a Who!*—an unlikely, daring, yet ingenious contrast. His evocritical commentary is considerably leavened with traditional insights, a veritable exemplar of how biology can complement classic scholarship. Boyd does not invalidate earlier readings, but rather gives them a new, richer justification. Given the two and a half millennia of readings of *The Odyssey*, it is notable how evocriticism helps Boyd discern new patterns that are meaningful to his model. He does not take for granted an author’s ability to attract and hold our attention in competition with so much else. He shows how Homer greatly transcends the tradition in which he narrated. Here, he offers, as pediment, much conventional study, such as numerous interconnections with *The Iliad*, its narrative structure, plot rhythms and ironies, and indeed, Homer’s narrative risks. He greatly deepens our admiration for the singer’s achievement. The sheer invention of the epic suggests that this is no early narrative, but rather a mature example of the same. Implicitly, Boyd’s study addresses the important issue of why our appreciation of a classic may deepen with rereading, hence the discernment of meaningful patterns, rather than being satisfied by the mere revelation of the plot. Boyd also uses Homer as a basis for advancing his model of the evolution of intelligence. He discerns, despite Homer’s lack of terminology for subjectivity, signs of internal experiences not unlike our own, *pace* Julian Jaynes and Erich Auerbach. Indeed, Boyd shows how the poet utilizes a dizzying array of

perspectives, requiring the use of our metarepresentational mind. We should not lose sight of the fact that the original audiences heard, not read, this epic. Like other singers, Homer focuses on moral violations that are relevant to a social species. Boyd cites *xenia* as a Greek example of evolved cooperation, whereby Greeks would host compatriot strangers.

Boyd advocates scholarship that applies “a problem-solution model to multiple levels.” He reads *Horton* on four levels: universal (human nature), local (culture), individual (per Seuss’s biography and personal situation), and particular (how *Horton* develops and differs from Seuss’s other works), much transcending the established scholarship of how the story conveys Seuss’s response to visiting Japan’s nascent democracy in 1953. Boyd shows how Seuss plays with natural proclivities, especially “folk psychology” and the like, for purposes of cognitive play. He argues that these universals, not local subtexts, better account for its wide popularity with diverse audiences. Boyd attacks “Cultural Critique” for its serious logical deficiencies, especially its insistence on cultural differences as the major determinant of artistic form and content. Instead he suggests multilevel explanations that take in a variety of factors—and practices this by citing many influences on Seuss. Boyd asserts individuality as a biological fact central to evolution. He connects creativity to this same problem-solving industry. He posits that the more creative differ more from the cultural norm. Boyd describes Seuss’ creative problems and solutions in *Horton*, especially how he managed to establish an audience with a truly multivalent art, “calling on many features with deep biological roots” (p. 367). Amongst a dizzying array of fruitful questions and novel perspectives, Boyd asks about what we learn from a tale—recognizing that we may draw many diverse lessons—and how we learn it. Ever resourceful, he suggests a number of likely interpretations of *Horton*, arguing that the author needs to “appeal to attention in every line”, and indeed that reading is “a process of continual creative discovery” (pp. 375, 377).

In conclusion, Boyd calls for an evocriticism that consists of a greater interdisciplinarity, saying that it is not a new theory but a method that invokes concrete questions and falsifiability (p. 388). It also benefits from much, albeit not all, established knowledge. He sees the significance of “attention capture” and how it gives us an index into many other important issues such as genre, niche, and audience (p. 392). Perhaps Boyd understates perspectives such as those by Michelle Scalise Sugiyama and Joseph Carroll—who are well-equipped to argue their own—and we may wish to hear more regarding the evolutionary sense of how art can be a system for generating new variations, but *On the Origin of Stories* contains a wealth and quality of ideas to inform and inspire future inquiry.