“The Historical Position of Literary Darwinism”

Thursday 18 September
3:30 pm
BI 587

Abstract:
Literary Darwinism is a theoretical school that aims to integrate literary study with evolutionary social science—with behavioral ecology, evolutionary psychology, and related fields. The central premise of literary Darwinism is that literature is produced and consumed to satisfy the evolved and adapted needs of human nature. A subsidiary premise is that literature takes human nature as its primary subject and derives much of its affective power from tapping into basic emotions rooted in conserved features of our species-typical neurophysiology. I shall locate this contemporary movement within a telescoping series of scientific developments extending over the past two centuries. Lyell’s Principles of Geology established the necessary context for Darwin’s theory of natural selection; Darwinian biology established the necessary context for evolutionary social science; and evolutionary social science provides the necessary context for literary Darwinism. Over the past few years, a basic correction in the conceptual structure of evolutionary social science has been taking place: the incorporation of “multi-level selection.” Selection at the level of the social group is mediated by specifically human adaptations for “culture.” Evolutionary social science is now just beginning to formulate basic, comprehensive principles of culture. Those principles thus far have concentrated on technology and cooperative social endeavor. Current debates over the adaptive function of literature and the other arts can deepen and extend our understanding of the adaptive functions of culture.

– All Welcome –

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