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A Darwinian Approach to *Waiting for Godot*?

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Any attempt to bridge the divide between science and the humanities inevitably runs into the fundamental difference in epistemology between the two branches of knowledge. Science operates on the premise that some ideas are inherently better than others—in terms of soundness, validity, and correspondence with systematically culled empirical findings—and that knowledge advances through a dual process of generating new ideas and ruthlessly discarding those that fail to pass muster. In the humanities, on the other hand, it is assumed that ideas cannot be disentangled from the individuals or groups who conceive of them, and so privileging one idea over another is an exclusionary, or even an oppressive enterprise. According to this view, an adherence to Enlightenment principles, like positivism and empiricism, betrays an allegiance to wealthy men of European descent, and a will to exclude everyone else—the poor, women, people of other ethnicities. Scholars in the humanities, therefore, seek not to dispel invalid or empirically failed ideas, but rather to open the way for the inclusion of ideas as disparate and as diverse as possible. Literary criticism sits at the nexus of all the theoretical approaches in the humanities, and so the new school of criticism inspired by biological and behavioral science known as Evolutionary Criticism can be counted on to stir controversy.

The work of Samuel Beckett appears on first glance to be as far from the realm of evolutionary biology as the Theater of the Absurd is from the most grandiose realist novels of the nineteenth century. What light, for instance, could theories about mental adaptations for survival and reproduction possibly shed on the four characters of Beckett's most famous play *Waiting for Godot*, all of whom are male and two of whom spend a significant portion of their time on stage discussing suicide? Can a Darwinian approach, emphasizing universals in human behavior and relying on a strict scientific epistemology, offer any insight into such an enigmatic play, at once so tragic and absurd? The more important issue, though, may be what it would mean for the humanities if Literary Darwinism succeeds in establishing itself as viable critical methodology. Can it be reconciled with existing theories? Or must one epistemology thoroughly supplant the other?